

THE CONNECTION BUILDING THEODICY

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Abstract: In this paper, I present a new theodicy, which I call the *connection building theodicy (CBT)*. The basic idea behind this theodicy is that virtuous responses to evil allow for certain types of ongoing, intrinsically valuable connections of appreciation, contribution, and what I call “intimacy” between personal agents. Because of their ongoing character, arguably the value of these connections will eventually outweigh the disvalue of the evils that God must allow in order for them to exist. After presenting the basic idea of the theodicy, I consider a series of objections, and argue for its philosophical, theological, and practical fruitfulness. I do not claim the CBT offers the sole reason why God allows evil, only that it provides an important and neglected set of reasons.

Introduction

In this paper, I will propose a new theodicy, which I call the *connection-building theodicy (CBT)*, but which others have encouraged me to call the *love theodicy*.¹ As with most theodicies, the CBT assumes the so-called “greater good principle,” which roughly says that God would only allow an evil (or type of evil) if God’s allowing it is necessary for a greater good, or the prevention of a greater evil. Since under open theism, God cannot predict all the consequences of allowing an evil to occur, an open theist would need to appropriately qualify the above statement to take this into account – e.g., as a first approximation, by substituting “likely to be necessary for a greater good . . .” for “necessary for a greater good . . .” in the above statement of the principle. Although I am sympathetic to open theism, for the sake of simplicity of exposition, I will neglect these qualifications in the remaining part of the paper.

I do not claim the greater goods cited by the CBT provide the sole reason that God allows evil; in fact, in some cases, they might not even provide the primary reason why God allows an evil, but only compensatory goods that help morally justify God’s allowing it. Consequently, the CBT should be seen as adding to other theodicies by articulating a potential greater good that has been neglected. Nonetheless, throughout this paper, I will generally avoid appealing to other theodicies and instead attempt to demonstrate the extent to which the CBT is able to function as a stand-alone theodicy. Finally, although the CBT does not presuppose any particular religious tradition, I will often show how it fits with orthodox Christianity and the New Testament, and also use the latter to illustrate, elaborate, and develop some aspects of it.

The paper is organized as follows. I first explicate the basic claims of the CBT. Then I answer a variety of objections that could be raised against it. Finally, I explicate what is perhaps its greatest strength: its potential explanatory, practical, spiritual, and theological fruitfulness.

The CBT Explained

The basic idea of the CBT can be understood as consisting of two major postulates:

1. Virtuous responses to evil create intrinsically valuable connections among persons, with the type of connection corresponding to the type of virtuous act.
2. Some of these connections will last forever as an *ongoing* part of the conscious experience of both the performers and recipients of the virtuous acts.

Using these two postulates, I will argue that it is plausible to hold that the value of such connections outweigh both the finite evils of this life along with any negative connections formed by unvirtuous actions.

At its most fundamental level, a connection is a special sort of relation between persons (or even persons and non-human creation) resulting from significant past interaction between them, particularly interactions involving morally significant actions. The basis for hypothesizing such connections is that people commonly claim to feel deeply connected to other human beings, such as their parents, their spouses, or someone who has greatly helped them in times of suffering and hardship. For example, people who have risked their lives for each other (such as in war) often feel such a connection and attach great value to it. Such connections are often expressed by saying that the other person is “like family” or is like a “part” of one’s self.

For the purposes of the CBT, the relevant connections formed by virtuous actions come in at least three closely interrelated forms: that of *appreciation*, *contribution*, and *intimacy* (for lack of a better word). Since often a virtuous action will create all three forms of connections, I will label the set of these connections as those of *appreciation*, *contribution*, and *intimacy* (ACI).

The connection of appreciation occurs when one has appreciation and gratitude for another person because of what the person has done. In this life, this connection of appreciation is never complete since we cannot be fully aware of another’s contribution to our lives. As I will argue below, it is reasonable to assume that in the next life we will gain a complete, or at least nearly complete, awareness of these contributions. Thus, for instance, if Sue self-sacrificially helps Rebecca in her time of need, the eventual awareness of this could enable Rebecca to have an ongoing appreciation of Sue’s act of self-sacrifice.

The connection of contribution occurs whenever a person significantly contributes to the welfare of others. Many people have a great desire to contribute positively to the world and only feel satisfied with their lives if they have made significant contributions; they gain great satisfaction from having contributed, even to the extent of thinking that their life was worthwhile even if they endured more suffering than happiness. Often this sense of value goes beyond the value of the contribution itself, but crucially involves a perceived value of *having been the means* by which the contribution occurred; thus, for instance, if God directly provided for the welfare of others, this value would be lost. The CBT claims that this value does not merely end with the actual act of contribution, but continues as an ongoing reality into the future – assuming that we will eventually become fully aware of our contributions to others, as this theodicy hypothesizes. Since contributing to the welfare of another often produces a sense of an intimate interconnection between contributor and recipient (e.g., each becomes a “part” of the other’s life), I call this aspect of the overall connection “a connection of intimacy.”

The connections of ACI of particular importance for the CBT are those formed by virtuously responding to evil, which I call *evil-transformative* connections. They fall into three major types, corresponding to the types of virtuous response that created them. Further, the existence of each type clearly requires that God allows the corresponding types of evil. These types are:

1. Connections of ACI resulting from *one person sacrificially aiding another in times of suffering*, especially when that aid involves some sort of sharing in the pain and suffering of the recipient.
2. Connections of ACI resulting from one person helping another out of *moral and spiritual darkness*.
3. Connections of ACI resulting from *forgiving and being forgiven*.

In sum, the greater goods envisioned by this theodicy are those eternal, positive ongoing evil-transformative connections of ACI formed between two or more personal beings based on one of them significantly contributing to the other's well-being in the above three ways.

The Eternal Value of Connections

A crucial assumption underlying the CBT is that these connections can exist as an *ongoing* reality in a one's life, not simply a past fact about oneself. Consider, for instance, a case in which Rebecca's friend Sue helps her through a time of great suffering. The connection between Sue and Rebecca does not merely consist of the fact that Sue helped Rebecca during that time; this fact would exist even if both of them permanently lost all awareness of this fact. Rather, although Sue's past virtuous acts form the basis of the connection, its continued existence requires an ongoing conscious awareness of the acts, even if that awareness is only dimly in the background of their consciousness. Given that each moment of an ongoing, conscious awareness and appreciation of these acts has intrinsic value, the total value of the connection can plausibly be thought to continue to grow, eventually outweighing the evils to which the virtuous acts were a response. Even if the continued existence and growth in value of these connections is not inevitable, it seems plausible to hypothesize that it is within God's power to arrange our after-death psychology and environment so that this would occur without counterbalancing negative consequences.

The following crude model illustrates the plausibility of thinking that the good of these connections could eventually outweigh the evils. Suppose our future life can be divided into small successive units of time, Δt . Now suppose that for each Δt , the conscious experience of some particular positive connection has an intrinsic value of ΔG . Assuming that these successive intrinsic goods can be summed, the sum will continue to grow as long as the connection remains part of one's ongoing experience. In contrast, even though the mere fact of Sue's virtuous act will last forever (since it will always be a fact that she helped Rebecca), there is no reason to believe its value increases with time. The reason is that the growth in value requires the continuing instantiation of some states of affairs with intrinsic value, such as the ongoing appreciation of Sue's virtuous act.

As an analogy to this continual growth in value, suppose you had a minor toothache, but to get rid of the toothache you had to undergo an extremely painful operation. If you were told that the toothache would only last a week, or even a year, you would probably not undergo the operation. But, if you found out it would last for all eternity, you would probably undergo it. (I certainly would!) The difference in these two cases is that the disvalue of an ongoing toothache increases with time, eventually outweighing the disvalue of the painful operation to remove it, even if the toothache is only mild.

At this point, one might worry about the analogue of the economic law of diminishing returns: for each successive Δt for which the connection exists, the additional goodness it contributes might be less than in the previous Δt in such a way that in the limit of infinite time, the sum converges to a finite value. (Think of how the geometric series $1/2 + 1/4 + 1/8 + \dots$ converges to 1.) In response, I stress that even when considered as a stand-alone theodicy, I am offering the CBT only offering it as a *plausible* theodicy. Thus, I need to claim only that it is plausible to think that even if the good of the connections sum to a finite value in infinite time, that finite value is larger than the total disvalue of the evils God must allow in order for the connections to exist. And certainly this is plausible. For example, suppose one took the standard ordering of the real numbers as one's natural variable. If, for some fixed Δx , one were to assign a probability distribution for the sum converging to a value in some interval, $\langle y, y + \Delta x \rangle$, the least arbitrary probability distribution would be an equal probability distribution over this interval. Since the sum could converge to any value between zero and infinity, under this distribution, for any finite value, Z_E , of total evil in the world, the probability is zero of the total good converging to some number less than Z_E .²

Several Clarifications

Before moving on, several clarifications should be made. *First*, the CBT recognizes that some connections might have no value, or even negative, intrinsic value. It is only the positive connections that directly result in a greater good. (The problem posed by negative connections will be addressed later.) *Second*, the CBT does not claim that deep positive connections of ACI could not exist without evil. All it claims is that certain types of virtuous connections – specifically, the three types of evil transformative connections listed above -- could not exist without evil. For example, if Alice bakes a cake for Jane, Jane can have an ongoing appreciation of Alice for her generosity even though no one suffered or sinned.

Third, the postulated connections of ACI need not be restricted to those between humans; for example, they could occur between humans and God, between humans and angels who come to their aid, between humans and the rest of creation, between angels, and between angels and God. Within Christian theology, the connections of ACI between God and humans might be the result of God's sharing in our sufferings, redeeming us, and giving us power through the atonement to love and contribute to others. For those who consider the book of Daniel as being in some way inspired, the angel who fights against the "Prince of Persia" for twenty-one days in order to come to Daniel's aid (Daniel 10:13, 20 - 21) illustrates this human-angel connection, along with other cases in which angels are involved as intermediaries (Acts 12:6-7). On the other hand, a potential human-creation connection is indicated by passages such as Romans 8: 18 – 21, which

suggests that it is through human beings that all of creation will be redeemed. (For a development of this idea, see Collins, 2009b.)

Finally, the ability to respond virtuously to another's suffering should not be restricted to normal physical and psychological channels. Indeed, the CBT makes it likely that we will be able to affect each other through other highly personal channels, such as prayer, since this would increase the number of potential positive connections between personal agents. (See Collins, 2011.)

Potential Objections

I will now consider some potential objections to the CBT.

Problem of Negative Connections

Often pain and suffering result in the formation of negative connections, such as bitterness and hate. Several responses can be offered to the problem this presents for the CBT. First, negative connections could be considered an unavoidable byproduct of people being highly vulnerable to moral evil and living in moral and spiritual darkness, both features which also allow for certain types of evil-transformative connections mentioned above.

Second, and most importantly, *these negative connections can be redeemed through the victim forgiving the victimizer*. Forgiveness creates a new positive connection of forgiveness, such as the person forgiven greatly appreciating being released from the negative connections and guilt that they bear as the result of their moral wrongdoing; even the person doing the forgiving will greatly benefit through the act of forgiving. Further, the deeper the hurt, the harder forgiveness is, and hence the deeper the appreciation is likely to be. Unlike any other action, forgiveness can redeem bad connections by, metaphorically speaking, "encapsulating" them in positive connections.

For Christians, this offers a reason why Jesus put such stress on forgiving one's enemies. Further, within standard Christian theology such ongoing positive connections for being forgiven are not restricted to those between victims and perpetrators, but also would occur between the perpetrators and Christ because of Christ's forgiveness of them through his act of atonement on the cross. Whether these positive connections of forgiveness occur in all cases depends on one's view of the afterlife, which I will discuss next.

Hell Objection

The Christian doctrine of everlasting punishment greatly amplifies the problem of evil since even in its mildest forms (such as annihilationism) it implies that some people's lives will be forever unredeemed. Hence it poses an enormous problem for any theodicy. One solution is to adopt some form of universal salvation, such as some form of universalism which affirms the existence of hell but claims that eventually those in hell will be brought to repentance. Since there is already a growing body of literature debating the merits of universalism, I will not discuss the strengths and weaknesses of universalism here.³

Assuming for the sake of argument that there is an eternal hell, one might think that the CBT magnifies the problem posed by an eternal hell by adding eternally existing

negative connections to the other evils of hell. In response, first note that if there is an eternal hell, there need not be any ongoing consciously experienced connection between those in hell and those in a heavenly state. However, the CBT implies that those in the heavenly state have a memory of this life, which raises the problem of knowing that a loved one is in hell. I find William Lane Craig's (1991, 306 – 08) suggestion that those in a heavenly state would not be consciously aware of loved ones in hell highly implausible. Since the memory of a loved one (such as a daughter) is inseparable from other memories of one's earthly life, under Craig's suggestion, one's memory of one's earthly life would either be effectively made inaccessible, or it would become like Swiss cheese, full of gaping holes. Even if one merely knew of the possibility of an earthly life, that could easily lead to wanting to know if one had such a life and what it was like; God's refusing to answer such a request would itself raise suspicions. On the other hand, if God eliminated all such knowledge, that would also eliminate the knowledge that one was redeemed through Christ's atonement, or even the atonement itself. I doubt many Christians would want to hold this. The general problem of the knowledge that a loved one is in hell taking away from one's heavenly bliss, therefore, is a problem for any theodicy (or defense). Hence, it is not a reason to reject the CBT, but rather to reject the idea of an eternal hell or annihilation.

Alternative Routes Objection and Opportunity Cost Objection

Another potential objection to the CBT is what could be called the *alternative routes objection*. This is a common objection to theodicies in which the objector envisions alternative ways in which God could have created and interacted with the world that would have resulted in commensurate goods but significantly less evil.

To address this objection, the first thing to note is that unlike many theodicies the CBT does not hypothesize a singular greater good (such as a freely-formed virtuous character in the case of the soul-making theodicy) but rather a family of goods. For example, each of the three major types of evil-transformative connections – e.g., that involved in helping someone out of moral and spiritual darkness – is its own irreplaceable type of good. Thus, for instance, a world in which no one suffered from spiritual and moral darkness would be one that lacked the corresponding type of evil-transformative connection, even if it contained other types of valuable connections. One might conclude, therefore, that God is justified in creating a world with the different kinds of evil we find because only then could all three types of evil-transformative connections exist.

This response, however, encounters a significant problem, what I will call the *opportunity cost objection*: the evil-transformative connections are often obtained at the *cost* of other positive connections being formed that do not require suffering or moral evil. For example, although having a child that is seriously ill during her entire childhood allows for connections of shared suffering and special care, it eliminates connections with the child based on shared health and wholeness, such as enjoying a beautiful hike in the mountains. Or, to use a variation of an example presented by Stanley Kane (1975, pp. 2-3) against the soul-making theodicy, if one's spouse becomes seriously ill, and even dies, the possibilities of the kind of connections of helping one's spouse finish a dissertation or win a gold medal are lost.

To respond to this objection, it will be helpful to add two subsidiary theses to the two core theses of the CBT introduced previously:

- i. *Effort-Sacrifice Thesis*. Everything else being equal, ongoing connections formed by virtuous responses that require more sacrifice or effort have greater intrinsic value (per unit of time) than those that do not.
- ii. *Variety Thesis*. a) Everything else being equal, the value of a set of positive connections increases with the variety of connections in the set. b) In general, the broader the type that a particular new connection adds to the mix, the more variety it adds.

Being with and caring for someone during times of great suffering – such as a long, chronic illness – often involve special sacrifices and great depths of persistent, patient love. Consequently, thesis (i) implies that the amount of appreciation, contribution, and intimacy is potentially deeper and greater than could occur in the lost positive non-evil-transformative connections. Thus, plausibly the value of some evil-transformative connections outweighs any likely set of positive connections that are thereby excluded.

Moreover, in the heavenly state, humans will have plenty of opportunity to form connections based on shared joy or helping others achieve difficult goals, opportunities that an all good God would arrange assuming such connections are goods (and there are no other counterbalancing considerations). So, God's allowing evil and suffering need not cause us to lose out on forming a great number of these other types of connections, but in some cases only might postpone their formation to the next life. In contrast, if God did not create a world in which there was pain, suffering, and moral evil, personal agents would never have the opportunity to form evil-transformative connections, and thus the great good of these sorts of connections would be lacking forever.

Of course, one will always miss out on certain narrow types of positive connections that are excluded by God's allowing the evils in question, such as that formed by enjoying a beautiful hike in the mountains with one's child, as in the example above. However, many, if not all, of the significant, more general types of connection will not be missing, at least those that do not involve evil; for, even if they are not formed in one's earthly life, they can be formed in the afterlife -- e.g., in the afterlife one could form connections based on shared joy or achievement. In contrast, evil transformative connections can only be formed in a world with evil.

This response, however, assumes that the added value of new narrower types of positive connections decreases as the types get narrower, as implied by thesis (ii) above. If, for instance, the heavenly state allows for an enormous variety of connections of ACI based on shared joy, then everything else being equal, the added value of forming a particular connection of shared joy in this life might not be as great as the added value of the alternative evil-transformative connection. The same could also be said about certain types of evil-transformative connections, thus giving God a good reason to limit the quantity of those types of evil.

I do not claim that we know that thesis (ii) is true, but I take it as plausible. For instance, we think there is something missing in a life that merely involves a repetition of the same activity over and over again, or is merely focused on a relationship with one person. In general, we take variety -- as long as it contributes to a sufficiently unified whole -- to contribute to the richness of a person's life, and hence be of value.

Finally, even if a person does not experience a particular type of connection or has not had the opportunity to form many connections at all, it is reasonable to postulate that

one could vicariously participate in the connections that others have formed; this perhaps provides an additional reason for thinking that having a variety of general types of connections is of value. For Christians, this idea could be articulated in terms of the idea of the mystical body of Christ (which I take to include all those who will eventually be in union with God, not just those who are Christians in this life). The idea is that in the heavenly state, we progressively come to vicariously share in other's connections of ACI (perhaps even those involving non-human personal agents), just as many of us can vicariously participate in the joy of others – e.g., many people feel a special joy in hearing about two people who over many years have developed a strong, loving marriage. As stated by the Apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 12:26, “If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.” (Also see 2 Corinthians 1:7 and Romans 12:15.) Perhaps, for instance, we could vicariously participate in the tremendous connection of appreciation for being forgiven that exists between John Newton (the famous slave trader who wrote the song *Amazing Grace*) and Christ. If God did not permit evil, evil-transformative connections would not exist, and hence no one could participate in them, not even vicariously.

Lack of Awareness Objection

Another potential objection to the CBT is that often people are not aware of the contribution of others to their lives. One response is to claim that eventually all those in a heavenly state will become fully aware of this. Given that there is an afterlife, this seems a highly plausible. First, we have good reasons for eliminating the extremes of having no knowledge of this life, since in that case it would be hard to see what the point of this life would be. Further, the claim of Christians, Jews, and Muslims that there is divine judgment – whether restorative or retributive -- gives us good reason to believe there is some sort of memory of this life since it surely serves justice and the purposes of such judgment better for the one judged to remember the act one is being judged for than not to. But, once any memory of this life is allowed, unless God arbitrarily limits one's knowledge or ability to gain information about this life, one could always find out more. Even answers to simple questions about one's life (such the name of the doctor who helped one in the emergency room) end up leading to further questions (what other good deeds did the doctor do), and so forth.

Second, Christians have significant scriptural support in favor of this claim. For example, in Mark 4:22 Jesus says that “there is nothing hidden, except to be disclosed; nor is anything secret, except to come to light” (NRSV), with Jesus being recorded as making similar statements in Matthew 10:26 and Luke 12:3; similarly, the Apostle Paul states in 1 Corinthians 4:5 that we should not pronounce judgment before its time because God will “bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart” (NRSV). Although I would not go as far as claiming these statements imply that we will be completely aware of all the contributions others have made to our lives, they do strongly suggest that our awareness of them will be enormously expanded, which is all that is needed for the CBT.

Finally, in this regard, some Christians might object that the value of the evil-transformative connections would become insignificant since they would pale in comparison to the glory of being with Christ. This objection, however, runs contrary to Paul's claim in 2 Corinthians 4:17– namely, that the afflictions of this age can generate an

eternal weight of glory: “For momentary, light affliction is *producing for us* an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison” (New American Standard). (This idea of afflictions producing glory is in virtually all translations of 2 Corinthians 4:17.) Further, even if they did pale into insignificance, so would the evils of this world; hence they could still outweigh the latter, which is all the greater good principle requires.

Extreme Evils and the Victimhood Objection

Probably the most common objection raised against virtually all theodicies is that they cannot explain extreme cases of evil. The CBT, I believe, can provide a partial explanation. I will consider two examples, the Holocaust and a more concrete example in which a young girl is captured as a sex slave and then daily raped and demeaned until she eventually dies— with no one ever trying to rescue her.

To address why God allows these type of evil, note that the more God intervenes *apart from persistent human requests*, the less dependent our welfare becomes on the actions of others; in general this would decrease the potential there is for deep, evil-transformative connections, and hence one would expect such intervention to be relatively rare. If, for instance, God prevented the Holocaust, that would have eliminated a wide range of evil-transformative connections. First, the Holocaust allowed for particularly great degrees of forgiveness: the greater the evil that someone commits against another, the greater the amount of forgiveness that is possible, if not in this life,

Second, it led to an enormous number of people who worked at all levels -- politically, through writing, and the like -- to try to prevent it from happening again. Those alive since the Holocaust owe these people a debt of gratitude and *appreciation* for their work in making our world a better place, even though in this life we might not be aware of what they did. When all is brought to light, connections of ACI between them and us will be something in which we all can participate and treasure. Of course, if God had not allowed evils such as the Holocaust, humans could have still worked for a better world. Arguably, however, the connections of ACI would not have been as great, for it is plausible to think that the greater the evils that the efforts of others save us from, the greater the connections of contribution, appreciation, and perhaps even intimacy.

In the example of the little girl above, by hypothesis there are not any positive connections of ACI between the girl and others humans while in this life. In the next life, however, there is the possibility of a connection of forgiveness between her and her captors. Further, for theists who believe that God redemptively shares in our suffering (such as many Christians), there is another great positive connection, both in this case and more generally (such as the Holocaust): that of Christ redemptively sharing in our suffering.

Plausibly, the worst kind of suffering is that in which one feels completely abandoned and one’s personhood negated. To find out that God shared in one’s suffering would not only greatly affirm one’s personhood, but plausibly establish a great intimacy between one and God—as it often does if another human shares in one’s suffering, but to a far greater extent. This would only occur, however, if God’s sharing in the victim’s suffering was for her good (not, for example, so God could experience what it’s like to suffer). And it is fairly easy to see how it might be for her good: as we know from human cases, it is of great healing value to have another empathetically understand and “feel” what one experienced; and for communal beings such as human beings, perhaps

necessary for a full healing from being severely abused. In fact, it is likely that only after such a healing (with its concurrent affirmation of one's personhood) that it is possible for one fully to forgive one's abusers.⁴

It is also reasonable to suppose that through those who deeply suffer the rest of us can vicariously appreciate the depth, and multiple facets, of the suffering love and consolation of God in a much greater way than would otherwise be possible. This not only increases the connection of appreciation between us and God, but also creates a great connection of appreciation between us and them since it is through them we come to this experiential understanding of the love and consolation of God. This in turn allows them to greatly contribute to us, resulting in a further connection of contribution between them and us and a further valuing of their worth. By providing us with this experiential taste of multiple facets of the suffering love of God, in some sense they become the most honored members of the body of Christ. This is in accord with the Apostle Paul's claim that the weakest members of the body of Christ are the most honored (1 Corinthians 12:23).

The afterlife could also be arranged so that it is necessary for other persons besides God empathetically to share in one's suffering (at a deep level) in order for full healing to occur; in fact, given the communal nature of human beings, one might think this is a necessity. This would in turn create further connections of appreciation between those who suffered and those who helped heal them. The above possibilities also allow for greater goods to come out of ordinary (non-extreme) evils that no one in this life helped us with: to help with a complete healing from them, God, and perhaps others, would also need to share in them, and thus these sufferings would also result in positive connections.

It is important to mention two final issues. First, the CBT need not hold that the above positive connections are the primary reasons God allows the evils in question; rather, they could be compensating greater goods. For example, God might allow these evils to preserve a high level of human responsibility for each other's welfare (which is the pre-condition of evil-transformative connections); nonetheless, it could be the case that without the good of the positive connections cited above, this would be an insufficient reason for God's allowing the evils. Second, as Eleonore Stump (2010, p. 191) has suggested, it seems be contrary to perfect goodness to allow one person to suffer in order for others to benefit from some greater good without that suffering being a necessary means to some greater good that benefits the victim. Most of the positive connections cited above, however, are of benefit to the victim, and thus they fulfill this criterion.

Undercuts Moral Action Objection

A general concern with many theodicies is that they undercut moral action, since arguably, for many theodicies preventing suffering prevents the greater goods they postulate. One response is to claim that human moral action should not depend on such a cost-benefit analysis. In the case of the CBT, one could also respond that preventing suffering allows for other positive connections to be realized, such as those based on helping others. Further, since the CBT can be fruitfully combined with other theodicies (see concluding section), it can invoke other goods that would be realized by preventing suffering – such as soul-building. For example, even though harming someone allows for

a connection of forgiveness that can defeat the evil and its consequent negative connection, there still is the loss of a potential connection of helping the other person along with a consequent harm to one's soul (the reverse of soul-making). So, plausibly, in general even more good is realized by acting virtuously.

Fruitfulness and Implications

For those imbued with the spirit of scientific enquiry, an important but often underemphasized consideration in evaluating a theodicy is its potential fruitfulness, such as its ability to provide a positive framework for theological reflection and practical living. (From this perspective, a theodicy's ability to deal with the so-called "pastoral" problem of evil should be included as one of the criteria for judging its adequacy.) In this section, I will articulate some of the ways in which the CBT is potentially fruitful, which I believe shows its value as a good working, if not a true, hypothesis. I make no claim, however, that other theodicies are not as fruitful in some of the respects discussed below.

Love, Relationships, and Interdependence

The CBT supports the ethics of love of neighbor, along with ethical action in general, by giving loving acts an ongoing and eternal depth and value. Among other things, this helps resolve a conflict many feel between the apparent cruelty of the world, which seems indifferent to humans and other sentient beings, and the moral imperative to value and love others. The CBT sees this apparent indifference itself as giving humans the space and opportunity to virtuously respond to other's needs, and thus develop eternal, positive connections. Consequently, the apparent indifference and unloving character of the world becomes a necessary condition for the realization of certain forms of love.

The value of love is also something most people intuitively recognize, with people often saying that the most valuable things in their lives are the loving relations they have with others. Further, most people have an intuitive sense that somehow the value of acts of love transcends the intrinsic value of the acts themselves by continuing on in some ongoing form of connection between the individuals involved. Suppose, for example, that a person lived in a state of near starvation for five years to help someone hide from the Nazis. Further, suppose that both parties – due to some form of amnesia – completely lost the memory of the sacrifice that was made, and remained forever unaware of what transpired. In that case, it seems clear that some great good would have been lost as compared to the case where the memory of the sacrifice remained fully intact. Examples like this imply that there is some good that both transcends the acts of love and requires that the acts be remembered.

Love, understood as going beyond benevolence to interconnection, can be seen as the centerpiece of the CBT; the kind of connections it hypothesizes shows why every loving act is of such great, ongoing value. This, of course, fits extremely well with the Christian scriptures which stress love as the supreme, overarching virtue, and with other religions that recognize the importance of love. Indeed, the value the CBT gives to these interconnections coincides with the centrality of the metaphor of the body of Christ in New Testament and Christian thought. This metaphor suggests that love among personal beings is fully realized only within a network of connections of mutual interdependence as occurs between the cells in an organism. The CBT therefore, can be seen as being

based on the supreme goods stressed in the New Testament – that of love, interconnection, and interdependence. It goes beyond the New Testament, however, in making explicit how these are of eternal value and how they can provide an answer to the problem of evil.

The CBT also makes sense of why interdependence is built into the fabric of human life, all the way from the extreme dependence of children on their parents to the dependence we all have on the contributions of previous generations. This latter dependence results in an extensive array of connections that keep expanding outward as people build off the labor of previous generations. For example, many scientific pursuits, such as discovery of the polio vaccine, can be seen as resulting in an expanding array of positive connections: all those who have benefited from the vaccine are positively connected to all those involved in discovering the vaccine, including the supporters of the research. In the afterlife, many of these connections will become an ongoing part of our conscious experience. Similarly, there will be great connections of ACI between those living today and those in the past who have pushed for basic moral reforms (such as the abolition of slavery), or have worked to uncover and develop spiritual insights. Indeed, with perhaps some qualifications, every good deed one does creates an expanding array of positive connections into the future, even if the persons benefiting from the good deeds are not yet aware of them.

Finally, the CBT's stress on the value of human interdependence, and more generally interdependence among personal agents, leads one to expect that typically God would work through intermediaries, since this maximizes connections. Indeed, this is just what one finds in the Christian scriptures – e.g., God's working through angels (such as in Acts 12:6-7), or using human agents to spread the Christian message.

Hiddenness of God/Spiritual Darkness

The CBT offers resources for addressing the existence of moral and spiritual darkness, with the hiddenness of God being a special case of this. Although we could contribute to each other's spiritual and moral growth if there was no spiritual or moral darkness, God's allowing the sort of darkness we find in the world allows us to contribute in deeper ways. The connections of ACI would not be as great, for example, if humans only could help each other move from a morally neutral condition to a morally positive position. As is, humans can both help each other out from significant moral and spiritual darkness and prevent each other from sinking into such darkness. Although deeper darkness leads to greater evil, we do not know what the optimal balance is between it the greater positive connections it allows, or even if there is an optimum; hence, we do not know if the world would have been better if God allowed less moral and spiritual darkness.

Further, one must look at the issue historically. If from the beginning, humans had a high level of spiritual and moral enlightenment that was not subject to significant corruption, then there would have been far less opportunity for individuals to work for substantial spiritual/moral enlightenment and reform. As is, a vast number of individuals throughout history have fought and risked their lives and well-being for this. Those of us in the Western world, for instance, are beneficiaries of the social reformers who fought to overcome such evils as slavery, racial and gender discrimination, and the kind of institutionalized brutality exemplified by the Roman Empire (such as the gladiators or the long, agonizing crucifixion of prisoners of war). In the afterlife this will result in the full

flowering of a vast array of connections of ACI that would not have been possible if humans had always had a relatively high degree of moral and spiritual enlightenment. As stated, this claim assumes a morally and spiritually progressive view of human history, which I believe is amply justified when one considers the level of brutality taken as acceptable in the past. Even without a progressive view of history, however, one could still appreciate moral and spiritual reformers and activists for “holding back the tide of evil.”

For Christians the above ideas can help explain why God requires the ongoing, persistent effort of human beings to transmit the revelation in the New Testament (instead of, for instance, having supernaturally empowered the early disciples to reach all parts of the world), and why God did not make the teachings of scripture clearer. Instead, God has left it up to the persistent, ongoing efforts of humans to understand and apply the revelation in scripture, something which allows for connections of appreciation between those who through persistent effort have gained spiritual understanding, developed better translations of scripture, etc., and those who are the beneficiaries of these efforts. |

Religious Diversity

The CBT provides a framework for understanding why religious diversity exists, and how properly to engage it. Under the CBT, this diversity can be seen as providing great opportunities for humans to help each other gain fuller intellectual and existential understandings of important truths about reality. Although such opportunities would be available in world in which God guaranteed that everyone had the right overall worldview, arguably the extent and depth of the interconnections would not be as great. It requires considerable effort, and interdependent cooperation, to reach out across cultural and religious divides, overcome one’s prejudices to understand the point of view of others, and then attempt to integrate what one has learned into a coherent framework. Because virtuous acts that are difficult or costly engender more appreciation than those that are not, and because those that involve the cooperation of many people allow many more connections to occur, God’s allowing religious diversity has the potential of greatly increasing the quantity and depth of connections of ACI that involve helping others in their spiritual and moral development.

The above line of reasoning, however, need not imply that all major religions are equally true. For example, all the basic Christian claims – such as the Resurrection, Incarnation, and Trinity – could be true, and yet other religions could help Christians understand their own faith better, help them see additional truths about reality, and perhaps modify some of their beliefs to take into account the insights they have to offer. This understanding of religious diversity, therefore, should not be taken to endorse the kind of pluralism that says all major religions are equally true.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have proposed what I have called the connection-building theodicy (CBT) as providing additional resources for addressing the problem of evil. After carefully elaborating the core of the theodicy and answering objections to it, I discussed its potential explanatory, theological, and practical fruitfulness. I stress, however, that the

CBT should not be seen as competing with other theodicies, but as providing additional resources for addressing the problem of evil, and often productively extending or complementing them. For example, it extends the virtuous response and related theodicies (such as that offered by Richard Swinburne, 1998) by postulating an intrinsically valuable, ongoing consequence of virtuous responses that continually increases in value. And, given that one's self is in part constituted by one's connections with others, the CBT complements and extends the soul-building theodicy by considering a major part of forming one's soul as that of forming positive connections of ACI with others. This has the positive benefit of resolving the perceived conflict between self-interest and other-directed interest, since the two now coincide. Finally, although it is not obvious that the CBT requires that humans have libertarian free, it is plausible to think that, everything else being equal, connections formed by libertarian free acts are more valuable than those formed by non-libertarian free acts; thus, the intuitions behind the free will theodicy can play an important role in the CBT.

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²Such a distribution would violate countable additivity; I do not think this is a problem for infinite ranges, as I argue elsewhere (Collins, 2009, 249-51). In any case, I am not saying that the equiprobability distribution is the right one; it is presented only to provide a reason why one might think it is plausible that the sum converges to a number greater than Z_E .

³For a good overview of arguments for and against universalism, see Parry and Partridge, 2004. Many good articles addressing this issue are available on the internet, such as that of philosopher Keith DeRose (2011).

⁴This idea of Christ sharing in our suffering, and its ability to help with the problem of evil, has been pursued in much depth by Marilyn Adams (e.g., 2006, 29 – 79).