

The Power Dynamical Dissolution of the Logical Problem of Evil and a Foundational “Substance” for Metaethics

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This paper aims to show that the traditional problem of evil can be logically dissolved by a more thorough analysis of what love (Agape, Eros, Philia) and evil actually are. When investigated this analysis reveals that they are manifestations and evaluations of power dynamical relations leading to a conclusion that it would be logically impossible for God to be all-loving and at the same time prevent evil as all-loving constitutes an unlimited, unjudgmental, empowerment and good and evil are simply evaluations or perspectives on that power use. To stop evil God would have to disempower in some way and that would not be Agape and thus logically impossible as Agape is part of the very nature of God. This paper reveals the “form” of good to be empowerment and the “form” of bad/evil to be disempowerment.

Keywords: Problem, Evil, Power-Dynamics, Morality, Energy, Metaethics, Agape, Nietzsche

Introduction

It is said that “[a]theists list the problem of evil as their primary reason for not believing in God”.¹ This would seem to require at the very least a “natural” explanation for good and evil as it would be somewhat embarrassing to have to rely on supernatural accounts of evil to affirm your disbelief in a supernatural God. So, what exactly is the “natural” explanation for evil? This is the question that began my research into morality from a “naturalistic” perspective and to the conclusion that power dynamical relationships and “perspectives” lay at the heart of nature in general including human psychology and specifically for this essay certain human judgements. This conclusion aligned me to a large extent with the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche’s insight into morality as manifestations and perspectives on power. His philosophy – at least as I understand it – has proved useful in finding a path which, I claim, dissolves

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¹ See Thomas J. Oord, *The Nature of Love: A Theology* (St Louis: Chalice Press, 2010), 96.

the logical problem of evil, but far from affirming atheism as the logical outcome from the “existence” of evil, I find if anything a “naturalistic” approach can also support fundamental claims of theologians about God, principally that God is all-loving, all-powerful and all-good. It will be shown that good/evil, love and freedom are supervenient properties of, or perspectives on power-dynamical relations. In naturalistic metaethical terms this essay promotes a form of reductive realism, suggesting moral judgements are judgements of power-dynamical relations.² For much of the twentieth century any naturalistic attempt to define “good” or “evil” encountered G. E. Moore’s (1903) “Naturalistic Fallacy”/“Open Question Argument”, that was reputed to show that such terms could not be “reduced” in ways such as “the good is pleasure”, because one could always ask the question “but is pleasure good” leaving an open question and thus supposedly determining that pleasure could not be the “substance” of good. The argument doesn’t just apply to natural things however but any attempt to reduce the “good” to something else, such as “God is the good”. Moore therefore inferred that “good” was irreducible and thus “simple”.³ The argument has been less influential in recent years, encountering certain philosophical problems.⁴ Also, with the rise of scientific exploration into the realm of morality from a multitude of directions including evolutionary theory, psychology and neuroscience⁵ there is perhaps more cause for optimism that a naturalistic metaethical foundation is achievable. For me that foundation is to be found in power dynamics.⁶

² Or to put it more accurately a particular subset of power-dynamical relations.

³ See George Edward Moore, *Principia Ethica* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1922), 35–52.

⁴ For a review of some of its problems, see Simon Kirchin, *Metaethics* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 43–50.

⁵ There is a massive wealth of books and studies to draw on here but an example from each of the categories I gave are Allen Buchanan and Russell Powell, *The Evolution of Moral Progress: A Biocultural Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018); Simon Baron-Cohen, *The Science of Evil* (New York: Basic Books, 2011); Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People are Divided by Politics and Religion* (London: Penguin, 2012).

⁶ Power also applies to the fundamental “nature or essence” of God. Science and Theology (natural and supernatural) have a convergence here. This is one reason, I feel, why the theologian should remain interested in the results of this “naturalistic” approach for theological metaethical approaches too.

This “merging” of philosophy, science and theology has a long tradition – quite understandably – if one is essentially seeking some form of “truth”. If God is truth (or at least if truth is a part of God), then the search for truth must also be a search for God. This then is my fundamental theological/philosophical position. An attempt to unify different descriptions of the cosmos or “creation” and its creative forces into a coherent whole.

This essay begins that process by offering a more fundamental description and definition to concepts such as good, love, evil and freedom. One cannot of course just define things to suit one’s purpose, they have to logically cohere with other concepts within the tradition such as God and good, love, judgement, etc and the definition has to make sense, that is to say, show why such a definition is correct and preferable to current definitions⁷ and understandings.

The Problem of Evil (PoE)

I suggest that the reason for an – as-yet – unsatisfactory solution or dissolution to the PoE is that Power, Love/benevolence and Evil have usually been conceptualised as three separate, distinct and often unrelated concepts and therefore can be shown in a seemingly logical format of the now familiar kind, such as:

1. God is all-powerful.
2. God is all-loving (benevolent).
3. Evil exists.

But if evil exists, either God wants to stop evil but can’t therefore not all-powerful or God can stop evil but doesn’t therefore not all-loving. This simplified version of the PoE suffices for revealing the generally accepted formulation of the problem. This has in the past given birth to many explanations as to why God allows evil known as “theodicies”, and all manner of logical arguments from philosophers and theologians.⁸ The PoE generally reveals two types of evil, referred to as natural and moral evil. The former referring to natural occurrences such as earthquakes, floods,

⁷ In view of the recognized problem of “definitions”, mine should be regarded not as “hard” definitions, but more as an indicator of the underlying form of such concepts as good, evil, love and freedom.

⁸ See for example, Marilyn McCord Adams and Robert Merrihew Adams, eds., *The Problem of Evil* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990). Some solutions to the problem of evil are not categorized as “theodicies” but defences (just logical possibilities).

disease, etc and the latter to the evils which humans do to one another, such as murder, war, rape, theft, etc. Any solution or dissolution should deal adequately with both the natural and moral variants and ideally too, with the eschatological “Problem of Hell”.⁹

This paper demonstrates that a deeper consideration and conceptual analysis of the notions of love and evil reveal not just a link to power but a contingent dependence upon it. In short, that love and evil (as well as good) are themselves not “simple” concepts as G. E. Moore concluded about the “good”¹⁰ or indeed separate “things”, but manifestations and/or perspectives of a single thing, that being power dynamics and my key claim is that it is a logical impossibility to be both all-loving and to prevent evil. One can show quite simply that “good” is not a “simple” concept as Moore thought, but a term used for a power evaluation by thinking about a “good” can opener, what makes a can opener “good” is its functional efficiency and the power it gives the user over the can. We would not call it “good” if we consistently fail or struggle to open the can with it. I argue that like the functional “good” the “moral good” is a power evaluation. I make no claims here as to the underlying “nature” of the aesthetic “good”.

The argument I wish to make holds true to the idea that God is all-powerful and all-loving and omni-present but I shall argue that all-loving (Agape) means an unconditional, non-judgemental, empowerment of all and that good and evil/bad judgements are power dynamical perspectives and nothing else. That is to say good and bad/evil “exist” only as a perspective on power dynamical relations and these perspectives become possible through God’s omnipotence and omnibenevolence. For the most part I will refer to bad and evil as synonymous. To create and to love are to give other entities power which gives these entities the potential to affect others. It will be argued that empowerment and disempowerment underpin our judgements regarding good, evil and morality in general. Evil is therefore a potential logical necessity (as is good) created by an all-loving power in much the same way as a fire through its heat can be a good when it is warming you up when you’re cold or an evil when that same heat is burning you and destroying your flesh. Good

⁹ See Marilyn McCord Adams, “The Problem of Hell: A Problem of Evil for Christians,” in *Reasoned Faith: Essays in Philosophical Theology in Honor of Norman Kretzman*, ed. Eleonore Stump (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993), 301–27.

¹⁰ Moore, *Principia Ethica*, 10.

and evil are no more existent or opposed to each other than the concepts of hot and cold. Both speak to an underlying physical reality, but hot, cold, good and evil do not exist in themselves. They are judgements of something that does exist and that is power relational dynamics or energy transfers and it is to this we now turn.

What is Power?

Michel René Barnes' study into *The Power of God* (2001) reveals the importance surrounding the concepts of power, activity, nature and works/product in regard to the Trinity in fourth-century controversies and in particular the issue of divine productivity. "The expression «one power» [δύναμις] was a traditional doctrine in Christian trinitarian writing that captured well what the specifically Nicene doctrine of one nature or essence meant..."¹¹ These power definitions stemmed from the literature of medical authors predominantly belonging to the Hippocratic school:

...power means the affective capacity (or capacities) of any given existent distinctive to the identity of that existent. This sense of power is developed in the Hippocratic literature through associating power with the concept of nature (φύσις): power is the affective capacity of the nature, or nature as affective capacity.¹²

This general definition is reflected in other more recent non-theological discourses on power such as, "...the capacity to effect (or affect) organizational outcomes"¹³ and as "...the production of intended effects."¹⁴ For this essay I will treat power similarly to the early theologians and philosophers¹⁵ as simply the capacity of an entity to affect, cause or "make things happen", or indeed stop things from happening, such as a snail's shell having an affective capacity to stop certain things eating it. Power then is the capacity to do, to cause or resist another causal agent.¹⁶

¹¹ Michel René Barnes, *The Power of God* (Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 2001), 1.

¹² *Ibidem*, 7.

¹³ Henry Mintzberg, *Power In and Around Organizations* (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1983), 4.

¹⁴ Bertrand Russell, *Power: A New Social Analysis* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1938), 35.

¹⁵ For example, in Plato's early dialogues his understanding of "δύναμις [power] is that of an affective capacity", Barnes, *The Power*, 76.

¹⁶ We should also note how this "power" definition has similarities to the definition in physics of "energy", that being the capacity to do work. Power is work divided by time,

This allows for all existent things to have a certain level of power and not just organisms. For God to be all-powerful is to have the ability to make, cause or do anything within logical constraints, such as God cannot create the same thing to have both infinite mass and finite mass simultaneously, God cannot both unreservedly empower X whilst disempowering X simultaneously. Speaking of God as power allows us to think of God in scientific terminology: God as potential (energy or power), God as kinetic or active (energy or power) and God as actual or perceivable matter. The universe or cosmos is that which is empowered by God, from God and in God. Nothing is created that is not God, there is no other source of power or creation in the universe. If there were this would be a second God. After all, God is *all*-powerful. There can be nothing that is “outside” of God, for if there were then God would have boundaries or limits and it would be an “epitheistic” understanding of God. These ideas of God also have certain comparisons to energy,¹⁷ being that all of existence is thought to be made up of energy, that energy can be potential, kinetic, and matter and is said to inhabit empty space (vacuum) too.¹⁸ John Wesley spoke of God in “space” when he said “...the universal God dwelleth in universal space.”¹⁹

Whilst this model follows a pantheistic or panentheistic approach to articulate my thesis, the main claims in the thesis do not rely upon such a theology. God as Cosmos/Creation helps us to understand why Creation is necessarily good as confirmed in scripture where “God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good.”²⁰ Nothing evil was created not even the serpent, everything created (empowered) was by the Will of God for whatever purpose God had in mind for his Creation. This is perhaps why – writing of Gregory of Nyssa’s theology – Barnes quotes: “We learn more about God from looking at the universe that

work also being defined as an energy transfer. So, power is an energy transfer in a given time.

¹⁷ God and energy are both thought to be “fundamental” that being something impossible to create or destroy therefore something necessary.

¹⁸ Robert Jaffe and Washington Taylor, *The Physics of Energy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 404.

¹⁹ John Wesley, Sermon 111, “On the Omnipresence of God,” <https://www.wordsof-wesley.com/libtext.cfm?srm=111>, accessed November 4, 2023.

²⁰ Gen 1:31. All biblical quotes come from *Holy Bible*, New Revised Standard Version, Anglicized Edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).

God's power created..., than from any words."²¹ This idea has scriptural support – from Jesus no less – where he says, "If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, *how* can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things?"²² This seemingly necessary connection of earthly understanding to heavenly by Jesus and Gregory seems to subsume science into a form of theology. Perhaps Jürgen Moltmann expresses it best when he says:

God creates the world, and at the same time enters into it. He calls it into existence, and at the same time manifests himself through it being. It lives from his creative power, and yet he lives in it.²³

This "flow" from God to the manifested Creation or "being" is that of power. Power in potential through power transfer in the Spirit or Will (this being empowerment), to the empowered or actual "being". God as power, God as empowering, God as empowered. The empowered is identical to the Cosmos – imbued with God's effective power – and all within it. Power is the nature and essence of God present in all three aspects which reflects Gregory of Nyssa's thought regarding the unity of God's power with God's essence, they are for Gregory one and the same thing.²⁴

So, if God's Will and "Nature" have empowered the Cosmos and all in it, and that Will and Nature is Good, from where do we get "evil"? Before we can understand this, we must look a little deeper into God's Will, Nature and Love and why God's love (Agape) is empowerment, meaning the empowering of others.

Love (Agape, Eros and Philia) as Empowerment (of others, oneself and each other)

The ancient Greeks had numerous words for love, the three most prominent were Agape, Eros and Philia. The kind of love that God is predominately in nature or essence according to the bible is Agape. "God is love" occurs twice in the New Testament 1 Jn 4:8 and 4:16 and the word translated as love is Agape. If we were to conduct a broad search for the meaning of Agape we would come across the following terms, love of "other", unlimited love, brotherly love, a love of choice, yet spontaneous

²¹ Barnes, *The Power*, 251.

²² Jn 3:12, my emphasis.

²³ Jürgen Moltmann, *God in Creation: A New Theology of Creation and the Spirit of God* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1993), 15.

²⁴ See Barnes, *The Power*, 260–307.

and not out of attraction or obligation, it is the highest form of love, it is charitable, that is a giving kind, it is an altruistic love not a love of self, it is divine love. Stephen Post writes: “Unlimited love, which is another way of speaking of Agape..., is universal in scope, boundless in energy, perfectly enduring, pure in motive, and wisely efficient in its application.”²⁵

Anders Nygren (1890–1978) says essentially three things about Agape as divine love, firstly it is spontaneous and unmotivated, secondly it is indifferent to value and thirdly Agape is creative.²⁶ Importantly, he writes:

It is only when all thought of the worthiness of the object is abandoned that we can understand what Agape is. God’s love allows no limits to be set for it by the character or conduct of man. The distinction between the worthy and the unworthy, the righteous and the sinner, sets no bounds to His love. “He maketh His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sendeth rain on the just and the unjust” [Mt 5:45].²⁷

Remembering we are looking for a definition of what love (Agape) is, we must expunge the word love from the definitions and descriptions given to avoid a question begging definition such as “Agape (love) is unlimited love” or love is love. My argument here is that love – like “good” and “evil” – is not “simple”, it is not a “ground zero” so to speak but a term used to express something more fundamental. We find from the above plethora of descriptions that Agape is something that is given unconditionally, something unmotivated, limitless, something that is given to others, something given spontaneously, unjudgementally²⁸ and creatively.

²⁵ Stephen Post, “Nature, Grace, and Measuring *Agapé*: Science, Religion, and the «Flame of Love»,” in *Visions of Agapé: Problems and Possibilities in Human and Divine Love*, ed. Craig Boyd (London: Routledge, 2021), 33.

²⁶ Anders Nygren, “Agape and Eros,” in *Eros, Agape and Philia: Readings in the Philosophy of Love*, ed. Alan Soble (St Paul, MN: Paragon House, 1989), 85–87.

²⁷ *Ibidem*, 87.

²⁸ Unjudgmental, unlimited, unconditional, unbounded and similar are for my thesis the most important characteristics for Agape so I will give them here some justification for their inclusion. Firstly, they are theologically supported by Post and Nygren in the above quotes. Secondly it is biblically supported within the same quote. Thirdly, Jesus and the apostles also advocate a teaching of non-judgement of others such as at Jn 8:15, Mt 7:1, Lk 6:37, Rom 2:1, 1Cor 4:3–5, Jas 4:11–12. Fourthly, to love judgementally is to love conditionally and as far as I can ascertain no description or definition of Agape contains such conditionality. It is not my intention to suggest that Agape is the only expression of God’s love (empowerment) of others but the most important and relevant to this thesis. I will deal with a specific case pertaining to a judgemental form of God’s love in the main text.

Let us now investigate this “something” that is given that forms the basis of Agape (love).

If God’s nature/essence is power as Gregory suggests and from the above Moltmann quote, “[it] lives from his creative power, and yet he lives in it.” And God is love from scripture then the best definition of Agape is going to be “empowerment”. A spontaneous, unlimited, unjudgmental transfer of power from God in potential to God in manifestation (the Cosmos and all within it).

This can be viewed as an energy or power transfer into new manifestations of energy such as matter, the universe and organisms. Pitirim Sorokin (1889–1968) speaking of the ontological aspects of love often refers to “love energy”, “creative energy or power” and love as a “...creative energy of goodness...” and unifying force in nature.²⁹ This “creation” of new forms is an empowering of new forms as it is an energy transfer or transformation. As Divine love is a spontaneous empowering of new forms, including “life-forms” it is not an emotional love, nor a desire or need but is best described as an unrelenting dispositional “will” to create and empower “others” which is again a definition of Agape. It is the creation by God/Energy of new manifestations of God/Energy.³⁰ Agape is an energy transfer for the creation and sustenance of new entities or forms. Agape is an expression or manifestation of power. Without power (God’s Nature) there can be no love (empowerment/ Agape).

Agape can be expressed in potential as well as actual, that is a dispositional will to empower. If we love somebody this means we are in a dispositional state of “ready to empower” when the need arises, such as when a loved one is in trouble, for example, struggling to feed themselves through poverty or sickness. If we love them and have the power to help, then this love can become “active” and “actualised” by the empowerment of giving – or imploring others to give – money or food. If we said we loved them but allowed them to go hungry this would be a contradiction.³¹ Some forms of the empowerment (love) of others are giving money, feeding them, educating them, taking care of them or helping them

²⁹ Pitirim Sorokin, *The Ways and Power of Love* (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1967), 6.

³⁰ With a pantheistic or panentheistic approach God and Energy can be used synonymously.

³¹ Cf. Letter of James in the New Testament.

achieve their objectives, or just by being with them in support, standing “shoulder-to-shoulder” can be empowering.

Human love however, often comes with conditions, motivations, judgements and reservations such as when someone you love is an alcoholic but also in debt and struggling to feed a family. We might judge that they may use any monies given to indulge their habit and so not empower them. Divine love, Agape, is not like this, it is unconditional, unjudgmental and spontaneous therefore makes no allowance for how the “empowered” use that power. This immediately refutes certain logical challenges to the theologian within the PoE, where it is taken that “... good is opposed to evil, in such a way that a good thing always eliminates evil as far as it can, and that there are no limits to what an omnipotent thing can do.”³² The misconception of good and evil being in opposition is another reason why the PoE has been so difficult to resolve. For God not to allow the sun to rise or rain to fall on the evil and unjust would not only be a judgement but also a limitation on God’s love and therefore would not be Agape and thus not God. Applying limitations or judgements it seems “corrupts” Agape and thus it should be no surprise that God’s one and only commandment to Adam in the garden of Eden was to not eat the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (moral judgement, and specifically the behavioural consequences of such a judgement).³³ And why Jesus would similarly endorse Agape and non-judgementalism.

We should at this point briefly deal with potential objections to what may be seen as an overly “Nygrenist” interpretation of the theology of God’s love and introduce some alternative ideas in this area. Jordan Wessling introduces us to a “Value Account of God’s Love” where ultimately Wessling demonstrates the close ties between value, love and the good when he says that “God’s love is a valuing love that seeks the good of those whom are loved...” and “God’s love when directed at a person, is that which responds to the perception of a person’s intrinsic goodness by *valuing*... the existence and flourishing of that individual as well as

³² John Leslie Mackie, “Evil and Omnipotence,” in *The Problem of Evil*, eds. Marilyn McCord Adams and Robert Merrihew Adams (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 26, first published in *Mind*, 64 (1955), 200–12; This is also unbiblical as for example where in Lk 6:35 speaking of God it is said “...he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked.” Also, in Mt 5:39 “Do not resist the one who is evil.” Also see Mt 5:45 and 1 Pet 3:9.

³³ Gen 2:16–17.

union with her.”³⁴ This suggests both love and goodness have an intrinsic relation in some way with flourishing or well-being. There are three problems I see with Wessling’s thesis from the perspective of the intentions of this thesis. Firstly, Wessling makes no attempt to unify or tackle God’s love for humans and the presence of evil. Secondly, love and goodness are defined vaguely in terms of flourishing, well-being and value and thirdly, Wessling endorses the “Methodological thesis” that states that in examining notions of ideal human love we in some way access a knowledge of divine love.³⁵ It is not obvious what is meant by “ideal” in this context and by introducing a “bottom-up” approach and an evaluative approach one runs the risk of introducing human judgement into the valuation of the “loved”, adding prejudicial terms like “appropriate”³⁶ and in essence try to extrapolate from our “fallen” judgemental state to the perfect love of the Divine state. Once we introduce notions of human valuation and apply it to God, I would suggest we have already gone wrong, remembering that it is precisely our values and judgements that are at issue when it comes to salvation.³⁷ Let us look at an example to show the kind of problem I foresee in the context of promoting “ideal” well-being or flourishing from an evaluative perspective.

It could be argued that Adolf Hitler “loved” Germany and the German people, he wanted to see the German people unified, healthy, flourishing, growing and implemented social policies that he thought would lead to such an outcome. He wanted to inculcate a feeling of “oneness” among the people, give them pride in their nation and a desire to empower or love (to be in union with) the state in return. The degree to which a person was seen to want this unity with the state and its flourishing was also a measure of the value to the state/authority of that person. Those that were deemed as not contributing to, or indeed resistant to

³⁴ Jordan Wessling, *Love Divine: A Systematic Account of God’s Love for Humanity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 39–40. (Kindle Edition).

³⁵ *Ibidem*, 19–20.

³⁶ Wessling introduces us the argument from maximal love where premise 2 states “Every maximally loving being supremely loves all entities that are appropriate candidates for this being’s supreme love.” He does go on to conclude that “God loves every human with supreme love.” *Ibidem*, 149.

³⁷ Let us not forget what “eating the fruit” implies. Taken to an extreme the “Methodological thesis” might suggest that given enough time and thought we could “save ourselves” by discovering “ideal” human love and thus divine love and practice it without the need for Jesus’ teaching, example and sacrifice.

this vision were “judged” to be of lesser worth to the state and in need of some kind of “education”, rectification, punishment or indeed annihilation. These latter practices all justified in some way by the over-arching “greater good” or flourishing of the German people. We must be very careful that our human interpretations of God, love and divine justice do not in any way resemble “Hitler’s love”. Unfortunately, some theological ideas do at times resemble this, especially some eschatological accounts. It is Hitler’s evaluation of what is valuable, essentially his judgement in conjunction with his goal of a flourishing or empowered Germany that sets up the potential for evil. This is why God’s perfect love and valuation cannot be contaminated with human notions of value or worthiness, essentially a judgement and why Jesus makes this point throughout his teaching, most notably perhaps where he says:

For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly father is perfect.³⁸

We therefore have to be careful with phrases such as “God punishes not in opposition to His love but as an expression of it.”³⁹ Couldn’t we say the same thing about Hitler? Hitler punishes in accordance with his values and “love”, that being a flourishing Germany. I am not suggesting Wessling intends any such outcome from his thesis or hasn’t taken measures to avoid them I am simply trying to show how invoking human ideas of “ideal” love is problematic when extrapolating back to God, even if one were to take the flourishing of the whole of humanity as your value, the judgements and subsequent actions involved in achieving it will almost certainly open the door to “evil” at least from the “perspective” of some. This is why I think Nygren is right to insist on Agape being an unjudgmental, unlimited love and it being the fundamental form of God’s love and hence the perfect form of Christian love taught by Jesus. We will now turn to another theologian critical of the conclusions of Nygren, Thomas Oord.

Oord defines love as “to act intentionally, in sympathetic/empathetic response to God and others, to promote overall well-being”.⁴⁰ We can

³⁸ Mt 5:46–48.

³⁹ Wessling, *Love Divine*, 207

⁴⁰ Oord, *The Nature of Love*, 17.

see the similarities with Wessling in the terms flourishing and well-being where I will of course argue that these definitions are too vague to be of much use and that empowerment is the foundational form underlying well-being and flourishing in its numerous manifestations, such as physical empowerment (a well-being in health), social empowerment cashed out in influence amongst conspecifics and friends, fiscal empowerment (financial well-being) which all helps to lead to a psychological well-being with perhaps spiritual empowerment being a development of will necessary to balance these individual sources of power and not to focus on one to the detriment of others. We would certainly not see someone in poverty, unhealthy and depressed as someone who is flourishing or in a state of “well-being”.

Oord lists many manifestations of love and concludes that “[a]lthough each form tells us something about what love looks like, we cannot reduce all to one form.”⁴¹ Let us look at the examples he gives to see if we cannot reduce them to “empowerment”. He first gives the parables of the good Samaritan and the prodigal son. The former being a case of multiple types of empowerment, such as physical empowerment by taking care of the wounds, but also financial empowerment by paying for the inn and social empowerment by showing the victim they are not alone. The latter (prodigal son) is fundamentally social empowerment by the father showing his joy and appreciation at the return of the son, letting the son know he still has the support (empowerment) of the family, despite his transgressions, that is to say non-judgemental. Oord reminds us that Jesus says that the greatest love that we could express would be laying down our lives for friends.⁴² A sacrifice given for the empowerment of others that may manifest as saving other lives, improving others’ lives such as in resisting oppression of a group’s power. Jesus also teaches (empowering through knowledge), heals, (empowering the body), comforts, empowering the psyche.

Oord then quotes Paul’s lines from 1 Cor 13:4–7, “Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude”. If one takes an empowering attitude to people and doesn’t seek to disempower them in any way then all these things follow, patience while they are learning, speaking, thinking, etc it would be rude to interject or hurry

⁴¹ *Ibidem*, 15.

⁴² Jn 15:13.

them or make fun of them. To boast is to potentially make others feel inferior to you, thus disempowering. Kindness speaks of generosity and again a disposition to empower and envy itself is an emotion of recognized inferiority and as love is an expression of power not something an empowering nature can have. Continuing with Paul's description of love: "It does not insist on its own way; but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things." Not insisting on your own way again comes from an empowering attitude to others. Rejoicing in truth can be seen as the empowering nature both of knowledge and of God (if God is truth). The final four items in that passage speak to the unlimited, unjudgmental nature of Agape. An empowering nature can bear and endure even things that cause it suffering and it can believe and hope without limit as there is always someone else to believe in or give hope to, essentially to empower. So, I would suggest to Oord and others to look again as to whether love can't be reduced to one fundamental form.

Oord also makes the point that Agape is not the only kind of love spoken of in the bible in reference to God's love, a point I am happy to concede. However, I will argue that both Eros and Philia have at their heart empowerment. If for example God desires union with humans and this desire is seen as Eros love we must still appreciate it is fundamentally for the empowerment of humans and not God, Eros and Agape become coincident in God. Similarly, Oord defines Philia in terms of "...seeking to establish deeper levels of cooperative friendship."⁴³ Co-operation is one of the most powerful things in nature, it is present in most if not all evolutionary accounts of morality.⁴⁴ Interdependence among a group for survival will have adaptive effects in terms of their psychology, behaviour and how they should behave toward one another, Philia then towards our friends, society and even strangers, empowers all who experience this co-operative bond.

Oord's definition of Agape supports Nygren's unlimited, unjudgmental aspects, where he uses the phrase "in spite of love" and that "Agape is the form of love promoting overall well-being in spite of the negativity

⁴³ Oord, *The Nature of Love*, 115.

⁴⁴ See for example, Richard Joyce, *The Evolution of Morality* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000), 13–44. He uses the term helping in preference to co-operation. Michael Tomasello, *A Natural History of Human Morality* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016), 9–34.

the lover faces. Agape does good in spite of evil.”⁴⁵ Using my language of this last phrase. Empowerment empowers despite disempowerment. When this is applied to God’s empowering. God empowers despite disempowerment (evil). Oord’s arguments and conclusions here lead him to a theology of “Essential Kenosis” and my dissolution of the problem of evil has much in common with his where he argues that “God’s essential nature is love. As one whose nature is love, God necessarily gives freedom and/or agency to others. God cannot withdraw, override, or fail to provide freedom/agency.”⁴⁶ If you simply change the words love for empowerment and freedom/agency for power you have the essence of my theory. Indeed, applying the foundational power “lens” as I suggest may help Oord and others with their formulations and understanding of the problem and help further their projects. In this section, I argued that love could be reduced to empowerment and that Agape means to empower unconditionally, and God’s love is fundamentally Agape. What will be shown next is that good and evil are also manifestations of power dynamics or judgements upon it.

Evil (and Good) as a Power Dynamical Evaluation or “Perspective”

Power dynamics has been ever-present in the study of ethics over the course of philosophical and theological history either explicitly as in Plato’s dialogues where Socrates debates with interlocutors such as Thrasymachus⁴⁷ and Callicles⁴⁸ or Nietzsche’s Slave and Master moralities,⁴⁹ or implicitly often “lurking” in the language or descriptions of terms like good, evil, moral, immoral, right and wrong with the author never truly aware of its absolute “sovereignty”. For example, Mary Midgley speaking of natural motives such as aggression, territoriality, etc says: “All are wide, having good aspects as well as bad ones. All are (more or less) concerned with power.”⁵⁰

⁴⁵ Oord, *The Nature of Love*, 56.

⁴⁶ *Ibidem*, 126.

⁴⁷ Plato “Republic,” in *Plato: Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997), 336b–354c.

⁴⁸ Plato “Gorgias,” in *Plato: Complete Works*, 488b–527e.

⁴⁹ Friedrich Nietzsche, “On the Genealogy of Morals,” in *The Complete Works of Friedrich Nietzsche* 8, eds. Alan Schrift and Duncan Large, trans. Adrian Del Caro (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014).

⁵⁰ Mary Midgley, *Wickedness: A Philosophical Essay* (London – New York: Ark, 1986), 7.

Without a fundamental “substance” or definition of what good and evil really are authors are often forced to form question-begging or circular explanations and often employ moral terms in unhelpful, “loaded” ways within their explanations of moral phenomena. It is assumed that you basically know what good and evil are, something that philosophers who have studied it intensely, still struggle to define or define it vaguely. It is common to come across definitions or explanations for evil such as from the Neoplatonists where “...evil is a lack of being and goodness.”⁵¹ The question is begged as to what the “good” is. Disease may well be a privation of health but we must ask what is so bad about disease and good about health? Disease reduces the physical power of an organism, due to pains, fever and potentially death. Pain is often seen as an “evil” but this is incorrect, it is an indicator of damage or potential damage to the organism. Without pain organisms would – and often do⁵² – end up in a far worse state. Suffering too can have a “good” function in the maintenance of “well-being” of an organism. For example, suffering from shame, guilt or humiliation are all indicators of a loss or potential loss of social status or power for some reason and hence a motivator to make reparations and regain one’s social power. Speaking of Agape, Oord writes: “I define love as acting intentionally, in sympathetic response to others (including God), to promote overall well-being.”⁵³ The inculcation of pain and suffering in an organism promotes overall well-being through aversion to dangers, thus is itself a “good” and an act of love from God. The question of as to why didn’t God create humans invincible and immortal requires an answer to the question of God’s purpose for Creation and humanity in general, which I would suggest is unknowable and any answer would be purely speculative.

Some other general definitions of moral terms can be summarized as “[m]ost philosophers, and laypeople, assume that wrongfulness is an essential component of evil action... It seems that, to be evil, an action

⁵¹ Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy (online) “The History of Theories of Evil,” <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/concept-evil/#HisTheEvi>, accessed November 2, 2023.

⁵² Elna Nagasako, Anne-Louise Oaklander and Robert Dworkin, “Congenital Insensitivity to Pain: an Update,” *Pain* 101, no. 3 (February 2003), 213–19.

⁵³ Thomas J. Oord, “A Relational God and Unlimited Love,” in *Visions of Agapé: Problems and Possibilities in Human and Divine Love*, ed. Craig A Boyd (London – New York: Routledge, 2021), 135.

must, at least, be wrong.”⁵⁴ This now begs the question as to what “wrongness” is. We are in danger of a circular definition of the kind, “evil or bad is what is wrong, wrong is what is immoral and immorality is what is evil”. Or alternatively, “immorality is what is not moral, moral is what is right and right is what is good.” At no point are we ever any wiser as to what these terms refer to in the “real world” so to speak. It doesn’t really help to introduce “morally loaded” terms like “benefit”, or “wicked” as we would need then to justify these terms and what constitutes a “wicked” action or person or a “benefit”. Moral terms are already imbedded into the meanings of these words and so are question-begging and of limited use when it comes to trying to understand the “substance” upon which metaethics is its study. I argue that power dynamics is that very “substance”.

When considering humans and most life-forms, the obvious manifestations of power are physical power which incorporates the need to maintain homeostasis and execute physical causation such as opening a door, scratching one’s nose or defending oneself from attack. Sexual power which is the ability to attract mates or sexual partners, principally for the purpose of reproduction (but sexual power is still of equal importance to non-heterosexual persons) and for social species such as humans, social power which is the ability to gain friends and acquaintances and influence conspecifics which includes political power. Money is a proxy for power as money is something which gives us the ability to influence the world around us through conspecifics and social systems. Sociality itself is adaptive because it provides greater power to influence the world around you and this consequently improves one’s survival chances.⁵⁵ The increase in power from individual to group is important as it sets up the tension between a perceived “selfish” good and a “greater” good of the group which comes to prescribe the subset of actions seen as “moral”. The terms good and bad are also used for power evaluations of meta-represented groups. The power of these meta-represented groups is sustained with a code, law or set of rules or duties by which all can operate and

⁵⁴ Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy (online), “Evil and Wrongdoing,” <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/concept-evil/#EviWro>, accessed November 2, 2023.

⁵⁵ See e.g. Peter Corning, *The Synergism Hypothesis* (New York: McGraw-Hill Publishing, 1983), 5, where he says: “It is the selective advantages arising from various synergistic effects that constitute the underlying cause of the apparently orthogenetic (or directional) aspect of evolutionary history, that is, the progressive emergence of complex, hierarchically organized systems.”

adhere, such as a duty to defend one's group or nation if necessary and to contribute by working. For example, "it is good that our church was left a large donation in someone's will", or "it is bad that our company lost that contract".

The Selfish "Good"

From the perspective of the individual "selfish" human, a decrease in power such as becoming sick and bed-ridden or losing a large sum of money is seen as a bad thing *ceteris paribus* and becoming well again or obtaining a large sum of money, or a promotion at work as a good thing. It is the increase or decrease in power that makes it good or bad.⁵⁶ With humans being social-organisms, the power evaluated is quite often not just of the individual but also of others, such as family or friends, work colleagues, etc as well as abstract entities such as nations, companies, church's, etc. Feelings, drives, pain and pleasure are, I argue, evolved mechanisms to encourage behaviour that increases or maintains one's power rather than decrease it.⁵⁷ We get hungry, thirsty and tired in order to activate behaviours that maintain our physical power, in these cases the behaviour of eating, drinking and sleeping. Embarrassment, shame and guilt act to shape and maintain our social power. We learn over the course of our lives what increases or decreases our power and our emotions are shaped by this process. We learn to fear the things that threaten our power such as threats to our physical status, for example violence and war and our social status such as examinations, public speaking or exposure to public judgement. Yet we have pleasurable feelings for gains in power such as pride for an increase in social power or a personal overcoming of a physical ailment or joy for winning the lottery or obtaining a promotion at work or wooing the sexual partner you desired. It is natural for us to want to empower

⁵⁶ It is perhaps worth noting here that there is no one "correct" perception of power. Each person's perception of their best "empowering" actions and behaviours are entirely for that individual, for example a person may well conclude that obtaining eternal life is their best course for "empowerment" and rid themselves of "worldly" wealth in favour of following Jesus in some way. This is essentially still a "selfish" motivation, although the giving to others would be seen as an altruistic act. Alternatively, someone might give up a position of great social power which is proving stressful to concentrate on health (physical power).

⁵⁷ For a further exposition of this idea see Paul Curtis, "Nietzsche's Will to Power: A Naturalistic Account of Metaethics Based on Evolutionary Principles and Thermodynamic Laws" (PhD diss., Bangor University, 2022), 107–24.

ourselves such as increasing social power by promotion at work, increase in wealth or befriending socially powerful people.

The point here is to show the underlying power dynamic that is evaluated – often sub-consciously – that constitutes the good and bad/evil judgement or intuition which also sub-consciously informs and manifests as our feelings and/or emotions.⁵⁸ Let us now turn to the two different types of evil pertinent to the PoE from our new “power” perspective.

Natural Evil

Consider a lifeless Earth, with its erupting volcanoes, earthquakes, hurricanes, tornadoes, etc. This is all just energy in motion, as such there is no intrinsic evil to them, hurricanes can batter mountains and volcanoes can rain down hot lava and ash onto earth or sea and nothing evil is happening. It is only when we add a life-form or “perspective” that these things become potentially evil. So, let us add simple life-forms. Whilst it is true to say that definitions of what “life” constitutes are still under discussion, my summary of its pertinent features would be that “life” principally requires three things to be called “alive”, it must be an embodied, self-sustaining or “autonomous” agent, it must metabolise, that is to say be an energetic process, it takes in energy, uses it to maintain itself and in the process degrades that energy to a lower energetic level such as heat and other waste. Thirdly, it must be able to replicate.⁵⁹ As an energy transferring “mechanism” it is also a manifestation of power, it affects the world around it, and can be affected by the world around it. Any degradation in a life-form’s ability to maintain this process will be a loss of power and will be a bad thing from the perspective of that life-form due to the consequential loss of survival potential (although it should be realised it cannot directly perceive survival potential). Anything that maintains or increases its ability to maintain itself will be seen as a good thing from its perspective such as finding a large cache of food. Likewise, should a

⁵⁸ See Robert Solomon, *The Passions: Emotions and the Meaning of Life* (Indiana: Hackett, 1993), 209, who argued that emotions are evaluative judgements of gains or losses, “good” and “evil” or “right” and “wrong”. In this sense I agree with him and suggest exactly what “substance” is evaluated to provide that kind of judgement.

⁵⁹ For discussion, see Freeman Dyson, *Origins of Life* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1999); Andy Pross, *What is Life: How Chemistry Becomes Biology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); Paul Nurse, *What is Life: Understanding Biology in Five Steps* (Oxford: David Fickling Books, 2020).

volcano now rain down hot lava onto this life-form destroying it, we can see this as a bad thing meta-representing its perspective.

Consequently, good and evil only exist from the perspective of those life-forms capable of such an evaluation. A “life-form” or organism is a self-sustaining energetic process that needs certain requirements in order to self-sustain (exist). From the perspective of a carrot or pig, humans would be a natural evil as we rip vegetables up from the ground and breed and slaughter pigs to maintain the energetic process that is us. Natural evil is therefore an energetic transfer of one type (volcano, virus or life-form) that threatens the energetic process of a life-form. These are all simply perspectives on power dynamical interactions.

This is no less true for the human perspective. We think of these natural processes as evil because they can harm or destroy the energetic process that is us (injury or death) or disempower us in some other way such as destroying our homes and other property. If humans and their property were indestructible then these powerful energetic processes such as earthquakes and tornadoes, would not be seen as any eviller than a white fluffy cloud, or a light breeze on a summer’s day.

What we see as natural evil are simply things that can affect us detrimentally, that is to say detract from our power, such as disease. Other natural processes can not only affect our physical power but also by destroying our property and infrastructure they affect the functioning – and therefore – power of the city or state, as well as the financial cost of replacement and repair of personal or state-owned property. As money is a proxy for power any loss of money is a loss of power. Similarly, the “good” will be a gain or maintenance of power. If volcanoes spewed out gold and diamonds, we would view them very differently in terms of good and evil, even if they did kill people from time to time.

I have argued that natural good and evil are power dynamical perspectives, that is to say a simple judgement. A judgement that is so important evolutionarily that it would be “hard-wired” through evolution by natural selection (God’s creative, empowering process) into the central nervous system and psychological make-up of life-forms, making this judgement an over-arching value upon which to act. An assessment of what can affect you and what you can affect would be fundamental to any evolving organism long before they had the mental capacity to understand a concept as complex as “life” or “survival” and act upon it. It will now be argued that moral evil is also a power dynamical evaluation.

Moral Evil

Once we have assimilated the power dynamical perspective in relation to natural evil and how nature affects us it becomes easy to see how the same applies to humans and how we affect each other. As energy in motion seemingly constitutes the whole of existence, any organism (autonomous bio-chemical energetic process) must be able to evaluate these energy transfers as well as other organisms and their power potential. It is especially important for an organism to be able to evaluate what it can affect and what effects it. An organism is thus also a power evaluator and anything that maintains or increases power will be good and anything that decreases it will be bad *ceteris paribus*.

The “moral” judgement comes about due to the fact that we are no longer “selfish” organisms but part of an interdependent group or “social organism”, which is a more powerful entity and thus provides adaptive advantages. Feelings and emotions along with empathy, theory of mind, imagination and reason help us to understand what others are feeling and their requirements. If you were to contract a disease and I were to “empower” you in some way, such as doing your shopping and feeding you, providing company and care, etc this would be seen as a “morally good” act. I am using my power for your empowerment; I am empowering you. If on the other hand it was I that intentionally gave you the disease in the first place this would be seen as an immoral act as I am intentionally disempowering you. Similarly, if you were hungry but had no money to buy food, it would be a good, moral act to give you money or food as this is an empowerment. To steal someone’s money would be seen as evil and immoral as it is a disempowerment *ceteris paribus*. The choice between empowering oneself (or one’s group) at the expense of others (or other groups), or empowering others at the expense of oneself or group, lies at the heart of moral good and evil judgements. Anyone who deliberately sets out with the intention of decreasing my power such as stealing from me, injuring me, killing me, etc will be seen as bad or evil by me and due to empathy and our ability to meta-represent, also by others. Anyone who intends to maintain or increase the power of another will be seen as good.⁶⁰ The classic example of helping an elderly person cross the road is

⁶⁰ This would be further qualified by judgements of whether the empowered person is likely to use this power for empowering or disempowering others. Such as giving money would be a good, but giving money to the Nazi party in the 1930s would entail further power evaluative processes in order to ascertain whether your donation is contributing

essentially an energy transfer, the use of one person's power to enhance another's, as is caring, donating money, etc. Because there are different manifestations of power to evaluate (sexual, physical, etc) and different power domains to meta-represent such as other people, animals, groups, etc this is why moral dilemmas are quite frequent and applied ethics can be such a "minefield" to navigate.

The distinction between the selfish "good" and the "moral" "good" is basically distinguished by the "flow" of the power relation. With the moral good, power "flows" away from the actor to another, with the selfish "good" power "flows" toward the actor from another. Immorality is often seen when the individual increases, maintains or expresses their power at the expense of another or the group and morality is often seen when the individual decreases their power for the benefit (empowering) of another or the group.

The immoral thus act similarly in a social organism as a cancerous cell to an organism, taking power and resources from the group for their own benefit (empowerment) or ignoring the rules and/or values that serve to maintain the power of the group. They put the "selfish good" ahead of the good of others. For example, a player in a football team has a "duty" to play their best (expend energy and use their power) and contribute to the success of the team. If a player steps up to take a penalty in an important game like a world cup final and misses, this will be seen as bad from the perspective of the player, team and its fans but not immoral. If it is missed deliberately for selfish reasons such as "match-fixing" it will be seen as immoral as the player profits from the action at the expense of the team, fans and bookmakers. If found out, that player will lose social power and this is one reason our immoralities are – where possible – kept secret.

The selfish good – like the cancerous cell – however has a "myopic" view as in both cases the action may well bring about their ultimate demise, the death of the organism supporting the cancer and thus the death of the cancerous cell too and the selfish actor contributes to the potential weakening and "death" of the social organism which it parasitises. Whilst the "selfish" footballer in the above example only contributes to the weakening of the team and potential losses, in a large social organism such as a nation "selfish" parasitisation of the accumulated wealth generated by that nation by a comparative few can lead to people struggling to

to the empowerment of those who wish to disempower others, and hence an evil. This would be a judgemental or conditional empowerment and not Agape.

afford food, energy and shelter, leading to resentment, anger and potential social organism breakdown as “selfishness” becomes seen as the more rewarding strategy abandoning the rules, values and norms that maintain the social system.

A second example of good/bad, moral/immoral being a power perspective is with the action of rape. Two consenting adults having sex together is not usually considered as an evil, in fact quite often as a good thing. However, change the power dynamic slightly, such as one of them not consenting and now this becomes an evil, immoral act. The only difference is the power perspective, one person is now over-powering and the other being over-powered in some fashion. It is therefore my contention that all judgements of good and bad/evil, moral and immoral are fundamentally power dynamical evaluations.⁶¹ Having made the argument that good and evil/bad are evaluative perspectives on power relations and God’s love “Agape” is empowerment, let us now return to the PoE and see it in this new light.

Reformulating the Problem of Evil

If we accept that love (Agape) is unrestricted, unconditional empowerment and good and evil are simply judgements of power relational perspectives, then we firstly can see that good and evil do not exist in any distinct existential way and are merely concepts relating to a “local” judgement of a certain kind of energy transfer and its effects.

The PoE now looks like this:

1. God is all-powerful
2. God is all-empowering
3. Disempowerment (pain, suffering, death, loss of sexual attraction, money and property, etc) can be a consequential effect from interactions of empowered entities.

This is not to suggest that God in some way is losing power but “loaning” power to created entities by empowerment logically entails that entity can affect a power transfer of its own and this could be both

⁶¹ At least in the functional and moral senses of the words, I do not here extend the thesis to the aesthetic uses of the words. Also, some might choose to make a further distinction about evil or “pure” evil from merely “bad” that goes to the intention and even personality of a person, if such a distinction is to be made, I would argue it would be for a person who is disposed to “disempower” others in some way purely for the psychological joy of manifesting their power in this way. The opposite of Agape.

detrimental or beneficial to itself and other entities. Where the terms detriment and benefit relate to power loss or acquisition respectively. This has certain features in common with the “freewill” theodicy only at a more fundamental level of explanation. Where “freewill” is the propagation of one’s power in the world as one sees fit.⁶² This freedom to express one’s power could therefore be used to enhance one’s own power, potentially to the detriment of others’ power (bad/evil or immoral), or used to enhance another’s power to the detriment of one’s own power (good, moral). This choice is where we perceive the “opposition” in good and evil.

Once we understand that love and evil are manifestations and judgements on power relations the traditional PoE dissolves. It becomes a logical impossibility for God to empower others unreservedly whilst at the same time trying to reserve or restrict the use of that power. Evil is a potential logical consequence of Agape (love).

Agape and the Good

With the “moral good” being the empowerment of others we can see why Agape and the good are coincident, they are the same thing and why God is love is identical to God is good. It is because God is empowering others. It is now obvious why early Christian teaching stresses this unconditional (divine) love. This would be an empowering of others regardless of any “moral” judgement of them.

Paul reiterates this “love” many times as the foundation, perhaps no more explicitly than where he writes:

Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: “You shall love your neighbour as yourself.”⁶³

An appeal not to waste your power on your own selfish wants or desires. The First Epistle of John also makes numerous similar points. “See what

⁶² It should be noted that “freewill” is not a necessary constituent feature of the above thesis, the thesis also supports a fatalistic perspective. In addition, others have defined freewill (perhaps inadvertently) in power-dynamical terms such as Kevin Vanhoozer who writes “God causes creaturely causality, which in the case of humans, means freedom.” Kevin Vanhoozer, “Love Without Measure,” in *Love Divine and Human: Contemporary Essays in Systematic and Philosophical Theology*, eds. Oliver Crisp, James Arcadi and Jordan Wessling (London – New York – Dublin: T&T Clark, 2021), 24.

⁶³ Gal 5:13–14.

kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called the children of God; and so we are.”⁶⁴

The early Christian writers saw the importance of embracing this “holy spirit” of empowerment (Agape). To empower unconditionally has certainly not been something “Christians” have adhered to judging by church history, or for that matter just about everyone else. Judgement always seems to creep in, even for the gospel writers, for example: “Do not receive into the house or welcome anyone who comes to you and does not bring this teaching; for to welcome is to participate in the evil deeds of such a person.”⁶⁵ John here is ironically rejecting all those without the teaching of Christ who taught unjudgmental love of enemies and friends alike. John seems to be unwittingly rejecting himself from his own house.

We tend to only empower those we think “worthy” – as John in the above quote – and actively disempower those we think deserve it. Examples would be our giving to charity or “worthy” causes and “cancel culture” disempowering those we see as wrong or immoral. To put it bluntly, we judge others and act according to the judgement, we “eat the fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil”. Not to do so would indeed be an incredible leap of faith. This “judgement” being an imposition of our own values and ideologies on others in addition to our own selfish desire to increase our power at the expense of others is what keeps us from fully embracing Agape (divine love) and is probably the reason we have the “moral” problems we have.⁶⁶

We can never be in possession of God’s perspective or knowledge of God’s purpose for Creation but we can have faith in the fact that as good and evil is a matter of perspective, God created nothing evil and it fulfils God’s purpose exactly as intended, that is to say it is functionally good. If the “good” and Agape are identical (empowerment of others) then evil is a potential consequence of good and only opposed in the definitional sense that it is the disempowerment of others *ceteris paribus*. In order to do good or evil one must have the power to do it, to have the power one must be empowered, to be empowered is to be loved, ultimately to receive God’s love/power. Once this is grasped it can be seen that there is no theological “problem of evil”, just the consequences of unlimited love.

⁶⁴ 1 Jn 3:1. See also 1 Jn 3: 16–18.

⁶⁵ 2 Jn 7: 10–11

⁶⁶ Such as seemingly never-ending “tit-for-tat”, “eye for an eye” exchanges. Again, it is no wonder Jesus taught a policy of forgiveness as this breaks that cycle.

Theological Consequences of the Power-Dynamical Thesis

There are theological consequences for good and evil essentially being judgements of power and how one uses it and Agape as unjudgmental empowerment. Some might be more welcome than others depending on one's theology. The main one is the abandonment of evil as an opposing metaphysical force personified in the rather cartoonish figure of the devil or Satan. Satan can once again be the Old Testament tempter or tormenter under the guidance and authority of God, part of God's purpose and not something metaphysically opposed to God. I think this should be welcomed however as the traditional understanding of Satan in metaphysical opposition to God yet in some way co-operating in eternal punishment of the damned in Hell seems – to say the least – incoherent. James Matarazzo agrees when he says: "I therefore argue against salvific dualism on the grounds that it severely damages the coherence of the doctrine of God and eternalizes evil in the eschatic realm."⁶⁷ If the majority of humanity is damned to an eternity of punishment under Satan in Hell, then what exactly is Christ's victory over evil? This particular "problem of evil" is thus removed with this thesis. Which leads to the following potential consequence.

Remembering Agape meant unjudgmental, charitable, altruistic and unmotivated empowerment, perhaps the most unpalatable consequence for some comes from this very attribute. With no judgement comes no punishment or reward. Perhaps we should start to see the concepts of Heaven and Hell not as after-life destinations for the "judged", but consequential future world states depending on whether we adopt the "holy spirit" of Agape or continue to be self-serving and judgemental.⁶⁸ The dissolution of the logical PoE as outlined above leaves the theologian with a new "Problem of Judgement". Can God be both unjudgmental in the Agape sense and then change to be judgemental in the after-life reward and punishment sense? Matarazzo does offer a potential answer to this conundrum suggesting that love is the judgement and uses the phrase "to

⁶⁷ James Matarazzo Jr, *The Judgement of Love: An Investigation of Salvific Judgment in Christian Eschatology* (Eugene: Pickwick, 2018), xi.

⁶⁸ Jesus hints at this latter idea in Lk 17:20–21 "The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed; nor will they say, «Look, here it is!» or «There it is!» For, in fact, the kingdom of God is among you." That is to say, I would argue, as a community (perhaps global) founded on and sustained in Agape.

be judged is to be saved.”⁶⁹ Thus God’s judgement is empowering (loving), perhaps suggesting to us how we ought to judge, in that we should always seek the empowerment of others even in our judgements, rather than a disempowering punitive action. Certainly, more work needs to be done in teasing out the intricacies, problems and distinctions contained in judgemental empowerment as opposed to the unjudgmental empowerment I have thus far championed.

Conclusion

It has been argued that the Problem of Evil is only a problem because we haven’t ever really understood the nature of love (Agape) and evil itself and once this has been exposed as manifestations and evaluations of power dynamics the PoE dissolves. It dissolves because for God to be all-loving, this has the identical meaning of God being all-empowering, to empower “nature” itself including organisms such as humans is to create an interaction of power-dynamical entities with perspectives. Good and bad/evil are terms we give to perspectives on power-dynamical evaluations. Morality/immorality is also a specific sub-set of these power-dynamical evaluations due to us being individual actors in an interdependent social organism. Thus, it becomes a logical impossibility for God to both empower without limit (Agape) and restrict the power (limit) of those persons or things that do evil (disempower). This thesis has much in common with the freewill theodicy and Oord’s “Essential Kenosis”, however, the power-dynamical thesis gets to the very metaphysical roots of what is the essence of good, evil, love and even freewill itself, giving us a much better understanding of these concepts. It also deals with natural evil, which the freewill theodicy does not and relates it to moral evil. This thesis also doesn’t depend on freewill, so will still be relevant to determinists and resilient to possible new learning that may refute freewill or at least modify our understanding of it in the future.

This essay has also shown how we can blend a theistic approach with a naturalistic metaethical theory, that places all good and evil, moral and immoral judgements within the sphere of physical evaluations of power. The suggestion also being that these evaluations are so fundamental to life-forms that their entire psychologies would be centred around them from unconscious evaluations to the values that underpin basic feelings

⁶⁹ Matarazzo, *The Judgement of Love*, xi.

and emotions to reason and imagination, all employed in the business of helping to increase the power of oneself or another entity, such as a social group.

Whether we have to adopt the theological consequences of the thesis I have laid out above is a matter for further theological debate, however the basic thesis of power dynamics being at the heart of metaethics and good and bad/evil judgements is something that I think needs further examination and philosophical and theological thought. It was something Nietzsche proposed in the latter half of the Nineteenth century and something that I don't believe has received adequate philosophical/scientific or theological treatment thus far. At the very least the above can show the kind of process necessary to dissolve this long-standing problem, that being a deeper conceptual analysis of what love and evil (and good) actually are.

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