

## GOD AND TOLERATION

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**Abstract.** The enduring debate on the question of whether an omnipotent, omniscient God exists amid the existence of evils in the world is crucial to understanding religions. Much recent discussion has taken an approach in which the focal question is whether we can cognitively—for example, logically, evidentially, and the like—and rationally justify that God’s full power and full goodness cannot be doubted amid the existence of evils. In this paper I argue that we can reasonably assume that God exists in an evil-afflicted world if he chooses to do so and if he tolerates evils. We can reasonably argue that he does exist in an evil-afflicted world because he chooses to tolerate evils for whatever reasons. I would like to make a stronger claim: he tolerates evils in order to give humankind a chance to grow in knowledge of good and evils by combating evils, which implies that his toleration of evils imposes a task on humankind to combat evils.

The enduring debate on the question of whether an omnipotent, omniscient God exists amid the existence of evils in the world is crucial to understanding religions. Much recent discussion has taken an approach in which the focal question is whether we can cognitively—for example, logically, evidentially, and the like—and rationally justify that God’s full power and full goodness cannot be doubted amid the existence of evils. Let us characterize this approach as the cognitive approach. I wonder if we may do better by taking an existential approach that focuses on God’s toleration and free will. In an existential approach, the existential contradiction of the co-existence of an omniscient, omnipotent, and perfectly good God and evils is understood to reveal God’s tolerant nature and free-will. In an existential approach, the existence of evils is not understood as a cognitive statement that God’s power is limited or that God’s goodness is not perfect, but as an existential statement, akin to one Hegel might make, that existence consists of contradiction.

In recommending an existential approach, my purpose is also to address the Habermasian question of “how one can assimilate the semantic legacy of religious traditions without effacing the boundary between the universes of faith and knowledge.”<sup>1</sup> An existential approach allows a faith in God to remain a reasonable faith that can exist without justifying its epistemic validity first. It defends the faith in God by affirming something, not by denying something. It turns the table around to challenge others to demonstrate that God cannot be tolerant or cannot have free will. It also rekindles what we learn from the *Bible*: historically, God tolerated humankind’s downfall through Adam and Eve; God tolerated Cain’s murder of his own brother Abel; God pledged not to use violence, such as a flood, against humankind—God’s own creation—again, no matter how humankind is corrupted by sins and evils; God tolerated Joshua’s genocide; God tolerated Abram’s lies in a particular circumstance; God tolerated Satan’s testing Job by visiting him with sufferings and evils; Christ Jesus tolerated sinners; and so on.

I must clarify at the outset that I do not argue or imply here that God accepts or endorses evils and that God is indifferent to evils. Instead, I simply demonstrate that we are better off by focusing on God’s tolerant nature and free will, seeing that God’s full and perfect goodness does not exclude the possibility that God may tolerate evils. In addition, when we recognize the difference between toleration and endorsement, we appreciate that even if God tolerates evil, He will still encourage us to combat evils. When we recognize that tolerance is not indifference, we appreciate that the toleration argument actually inspires us to engage evils in order to defeat them. By this token, God’s toleration of evils can involve giving humankind a test and imposing a task and responsibility on humankind. In other words, God’s toleration of evils can be a statement to us that humankind must grow on its own, and that humankind bears the responsibility for this growth.

Since humankind’s downfall through its ancestors Adam and Eve, humankind has no longer lived in God’s heavenly garden, but on the Earth. The difference between God’s heavenly garden and the Earth is, perhaps, that in God’s garden, one is totally free of all kinds of evils while the Earth is evil-filled. As we learn from the New Testament, Jesus has not come to the world because the world is perfect and free of sins and evils. Instead, he comes to the world because the world is full of sins and evils. Humankind

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<sup>1</sup> Jürgen Habermas, *Between Naturalism and Religion*, trans. Ciaran Cronin (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2009), 211.

needs renewal not because humankind is perfect, but because humankind is still sinful and the human world is still corrupted by sin and evil. Thus, theologically, as well as existentially, God exists at all times amid evils.

Now, without further introduction, I shall start my present enquiry.

## I.

The enduring image of the Buddha is of a smiling person with a huge belly—an image that reminds us of a couplet that is engraved in many Buddhist temples in Eastern Asia, especially in central and western China: The huge belly can tolerate anything in the world, including things that are difficult, even impossible, to be tolerated by the world; the smiling mouth always smiles at those in the world who are laughable and things in the world that are laughable. The Buddha image and the corresponding couplet say that the Buddha is Buddha because he or she is tolerant and what he or she tolerates may be that which cannot be, and will not be, tolerated by the world, which in turn makes the world limited while the Buddha is limitless; it says that the Buddha is enlightened and therefore tolerant; the fact that Buddha is tolerant says that Buddha is enlightened.

The image and couplet further suggest that the Buddha and evils, as well as laughable persons and things in the world, co-exist, even though the Buddha is all compassionate and all powerful. This image of the Buddha and the acclaimed relationship between the Buddha and things in the world, including evils, gives us a clue towards an existential approach to the relationship between God and evils. Of course, the Buddha is not identical to God. Nonetheless, the image of the Buddha should remind us of God's toleration and free will, something that we seem to forget in the present discourse on God and evils. In particular, the image of Buddha in the minds of millions and millions of people has great affinity to that of God. The Buddha is "the greatly Compassionate One, the Savior of the world, omnipotent, omniscient, of most excellent deeds in all the ten directions."<sup>2</sup>

For our present study, the Buddha image and the corresponding couplet above suggest something illustrative. That is, the Buddha is wholly and perfectly good; yet the Buddha's full, perfect goodness is partially exhibited in the Buddha's toleration, not in the Buddha's intolerance of what is

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<sup>2</sup> *The Awakening of Faith: Attributed to Ashvagoghoshā*, translated by Yoshito S.Hakeda, in Forrest E. Baird and Raeburne S.Heimbeck (eds.), *Asian Philosophy* (Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall, 2006): 444—473, at 444.

considered to be evils for us. In other words, the concept of the Buddha's perfect, full goodness does not imply that the Buddha cannot possibly tolerate evils. Instead, it indicates the opposite: the Buddha's full, perfectly good nature is exhibited also in his tolerance and toleration of evils; the Buddha's perfection in deed, in all directions, implies that he tolerates evils and is tolerant of evils. Admittedly, in our daily understanding today, the concept of perfect, full goodness indicates a rejection of evil or intolerance of evil. However, historically or hermeneutically, this is not the case in some major world religions including Christianity, Judaism, Buddhism, Taoism, Hinduism. God in *the Bible* is perfectly good, yet God in *the Bible* tolerates evil. Christ Jesus is perfectly good, yet Christ Jesus in *the New Testament* tolerates evil. Buddha is perfectly good, yet Buddha tolerates evil. In Buddhist classics such as *The Awakening of Faith*, the Buddha is omnipotent and omniscient; yet the Buddha tolerates evils.

With what is said, let me here make three dogmatic but non-controversial claims:

- (1) God has free will; God does not necessarily operate by the law of causality and is not constrained by necessity; for example, suppose God is hungry, with free will, he may choose not to eat; by the same token, with free will, God may choose to tolerate evils (NC1).
- (2) God's nature is eternal and unchangeable; whatever he does or chooses not to do does not affect what he is (NC2);
- (3) existentially, the compatibility problem exists only in a relation between or among limited beings, not in a relation between a limitless and infinite being and limited and finite beings; to raise a question of whether the existence of evil is compatible to the existence of God is to assume that God is limited and finite (NC3).

NC1 and NC2 should strike us as self-evident, at least from the concept of God that we learn from the Bible. Though, NC1 differs from such claims as that God has this or that reason not to eliminate evil, for example, NC1 does not claim what Nelson Pike claims—that is, God has some morally sufficient reasons not to eliminate evils.<sup>3</sup> NC1 states simply that God may tolerate evil because he chooses to tolerate evil. Of course, the claim is also that God may eliminate evils if he chooses to do so.

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<sup>3</sup> Nelson Pike, "Hume on Evil", *Philosophical Reviews*, 72:2 (1963).

NC2 indicates the problem of the concept that if God is omniscient and fully and perfectly good, he can only, and must only choose, good; toleration of evil will be out of question from the concept of perfect goodness. For example, one argument has it that if God is omniscient and fully and perfectly good, he can only, and must only choose, what is good. This comes from the principle, as William L. Rowe, well puts it: "If an omniscient being creates a world when there is a better world that it could have created, then it is possible that there exists a being morally better than it."<sup>4</sup> "Rowe claims that since God is a perfect being, God has to create the best of all possible worlds because of his nature."<sup>5</sup>

In response to the above, in addition to the question of whether the best possible world is one totally free of all evils, NC2 indicates that Rowe's principle may apply to a non-eternal being whose nature is defined by what he does, but not to an eternal being whose being is not defined by what it does. Therefore, it is at least fair to argue that even if one accepts Rowe's principle, it is not necessarily the case that if God is omniscient and fully and perfectly good, he can only, and must only choose, what is good; that even if one accepts Rowe's principle, it is not unreasonable for one to assume that God allows evils to exist, even though he or she or it is omniscient and fully and perfectly good. God creates and governs the world "by a volition free from all necessity," in this context toleration itself may be a virtue.<sup>6</sup>

Meanwhile, NC2 does not suggest that God has no distinction between good and evil or that God is impartial toward good and evil. It simply says that God's full goodness remains regardless as it does not matter what he chooses and does so far as toleration or elimination of evil is concerned. To say that God tolerates evil is one thing. To say that God endorses evil is quite another. To say that God does evil is quite another yet. NC2 claims that God may tolerate evil. It does not claim that God endorses evil or does evil, in the context of its insistence that God's nature is eternal. It claims that God's perfect goodness does not exclude God from possible toleration of evils.

NC3 is conceptually plausible. Existentially, if incompatibility exists between X and Y, then X and Y must both be limited and finite beings. If X is infinite and limitless, then Y cannot be incompatible with X because as a limitless and infinite being, X will include and accommodate all beings.

<sup>4</sup> William L. Rowe, *Can God Be Free?* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004), 91.

<sup>5</sup> Frank B. Dilley, "William L. Rowe. Can God Be Free?" *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, 58:3, December (2005), 201.

<sup>6</sup> Rowe, *Can God Be Free?*, 128.

If Y is infinite and limitless, then X cannot be incompatible with Y because as a limitless and infinite being, Y will include and accommodate all beings. NC3 does not reject the possibility that evils violate the principle of good that God intends for humankind. It simply states that the state of affairs that X and Y are morally in conflict (S1) and the state of affairs that X and Y cannot existentially co-exist (S2) are not necessarily connected; the latter (S2) does not supervene on the former (S1); the former (S1) does not necessarily lead to the latter (S2).

If NC1, NC2, and NC3 above are justified, which I think they are, then we are better off by approaching God's existence amid evils existentially. We should change our question into: if God tolerates evils, will it be existentially possible that both God and evils exist? In my opinion, the answer to the question here should be affirmative. And the answer does not terminate discussion, but only develops new ones.

The new approach affords us with a new response to the logical problem argument. It also enables us to resist atheism without either denying that evil is a reality or denying that God is omnipotent or wholly good. Thus, for example, we do not need to follow William Alston and Peter van Inwagen to try to prove that we are in no epistemic position to justify atheist claims of the existence of evils as evidence against the existence of God. Nor do we need a counter-strategy to argue that we are in an epistemic position to prove that the existence of evil is not cognitively—either logically or evidentially—evidence against the existence of God.

Instead, we need to recognize the difference between cognitive co-existence and existential co-existence. Two mutually opposite, contradictory, and excluding claims cannot both be true—that is, they cannot both exist as true claims simultaneously. However, two opposite and contradictory beings can simultaneously exist as real beings. Thus, for example, a good being and an evil being can co-exist, although one is good and one is evil. We need to recognize further that being limitless and being omnipotent enables God to tolerate evil if he chooses to.

The new approach will look at how toleration and free will can change the landscape of discourse here. In my opinion, this new approach is more effective in defending a theist position; it enables us to reflect the controversies in the present debate over God and evils in a new light. It enables us to see that cognitive incompatibility does not exclude the possibility of co-existence. Admittedly, the argument indicates that at some points, we should accept certain states of affairs in faith, even if we cannot rationalize them or have full knowledge of them. However, this should not terminate discussion, but invites us to draw a distinction between a reasonable con-

cept of God and a rational concept of God. A reasonable concept of God does not impose the burden of rational knowledge and justification of everything pertaining to God while a rational concept of God imposes such a burden. What we need here is simply a reasonable concept of God.

A concept of God is reasonable in terms of the following properties. First, what is said of God can be reasonably accepted, even if we cannot totally and rationally demonstrate and prove it in terms of knowledge. Second, what is said of God can be reasonably explained, although some controversies may still exist. Third, belief in such a concept of God can improve humanity and human existence significantly and, conversely, disbelief in it will make humankind worse off. Fourth, it is hermeneutically justifiable. Fifth, it can stand up to critical scrutiny. Sixth, it serves the interests of human liberation, and enriches, not bankrupts, fundamental human sentiments and feelings.

With this said, I do not pretend to speak a new language here. What I argue here in effect amounts to a defense of a continuous use of the language of faith, instead of replacing it with a scientific language—a language that is more fashionable today. Admittedly, what I suggest here is intended to recommend an existential language to counter-balance a too heavily cognitive language in the discourse on God and evils.

## II.

Now let us see if we can read the logical problem argument in a new light. The logical problem argument is that the three theist claims concerning God are logically incompatible; they cannot all be true; instead, if any two are true, the third is necessarily false. J.L. Mackie succinctly indicates the problem as follows: “In its simplest form the problem is this: God is omnipotent; God is wholly good; and yet evil exists. There seems to be some contradiction between these three propositions, so that if any two of them were true the third would be false.”<sup>7</sup> For the purpose of our discussion here, let us number as LC1 the claim that “God is omnipotent”, as LC2 the claim that “God is wholly good”, and as LC3 the claim that evils exist.

For Mackie, as well as for some other atheists, there can be three solutions of the problem that LC1, LC2, and LC3 are all true. Solution One goes something like this: rejecting as false the claim that God is omnipotent (LC1), and accepting as true only the claim that God is wholly good

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<sup>7</sup> J. L. Mackie, “Evil and Omnipotence,” in *Philosophy of Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 263–264.

(C2) and the claim that evil exists (LC3); this solution allows one to say that the wholly good God wants to prevent evils, but he is not able to. Solution Two goes as follows: accepting LC1 and LC3 as true, and rejecting LC2 as false; the solution allows one to say that God is omnipotent, but not wholly good, and therefore he allows evils to exist. Solution Three is as follows: accepting LC1 and LC2 as true and rejecting LC3 as false; with this solution, one affirms the existence of God but denies the existence of evils.

The first thing that should be said here is that we must draw a distinction between two kinds of logic: existential logic and cognitive logic; cognitive contradiction and existential contradiction are two different states of affairs. The most obvious difference is that in cognitive logic two contradictory claims cannot be both true; however, in existential logic, two contradictory states of affairs can co-exist, which is to say, can truly or really co-exist. For example, to say that God is fully good and to say that God is not fully good constitute a cognitive contradiction and, by cognitive logic, the two statements cannot both be true. However, to say that God is all powerful and fully good amid the existence of evil may indicate the presence of existential contradiction, but is not cognitively self-contradictory, at least not necessarily so. In other words, to say that the world under God's eye is filled with evils is not to say that God is not fully and perfectly good.

The logical problem argument as described above has not drawn this distinction. In the logical problem argument, LC3 is read as a cognitive contradiction to LC1 and LC 2, while LC3 can, and should, be read merely as a statement of an existential contradiction. That is, LC3 should be read as merely saying that evils exist, and the state of affairs that evils exist contradicts both the states of affairs that God is all powerful and that God is fully good. LC3 is not a statement that God is not all powerful or that God is not fully good. To say that evils exist and are contradictory to God's perfect nature and could have been disallowed by God is one thing. To say both that God is all powerful (or perfectly good) and that God is not all powerful (not perfectly good) is quite another.

While cognitively, we cannot claim both that God is all powerful and fully good and simultaneously that God is not all powerful or fully good, existentially, LC1, LC2 and LC3 can all be true, if we read the matter in the language of toleration and free will. Suppose God chooses to tolerate evils by acting on free will, he can be all-powerful, and wholly good, while allowing evils to exist under his nose. All we need here is to recognize two truths: (1) God has free will (NC1 above); and (2) whatever God does will not affect his eternal nature (NC2). All the same, there can be a reasonable

argument or explanation that LC3 is not a cognitive statement that God is all powerful and fully good and simultaneously God is not all powerful or not fully good.

The traditional logical problem argument is that God, who is both omnipotent and wholly good, cannot possibly permit evils. This amounts to claiming that an omnipotent and a wholly good God *necessarily rejects* evil. This claim is also at the heart of Rowe's principle, "If an omniscient being creates a world when there is a better world that it could have created, then it is possible that there exists a being morally better than it," as mentioned above. However, this claim might not be valid. William Wainwright criticizes the fact that Rowe illegitimately faults God for what is logically impossible—that is, it is logically impossible for God to avoid not doing what he could have done.<sup>8</sup> In my opinion, Rowe does not fault God for what is logically impossible. Instead, Rowe could have recognized that there is no natural transition from the statement that God could have done what he has not done to the statement that God is either not capable of what he could have done or God is not perfectly good, which is the reason why he has not done what he could have done.

On a careful analysis, to claim that an omnipotent and a wholly good God *necessarily rejects* evil, is to claim that an omnipotent and wholly good God necessarily operates within the law of causality and is constrained by necessity. To claim that an omnipotent and a wholly good God *necessarily rejects* evil is also to claim that disallowing or prohibiting evils is a necessary condition for God to be wholly good. As indicated in the discussions of NC1 and NC2 above, the claim that an omnipotent and a wholly good God *necessarily rejects* evil is not necessarily true.

If God is not confined to the law of causality and the constraint of necessity, God's choice of good is not an act of necessity, but one of probability and of free will. If prohibiting evils is not a necessary condition for God to be wholly good, then God can still be a wholly good God even if he does not prohibit evils. Now, are we justified to claim that (1) God always acts from necessity and causality—that is, God is confined to act within the law of causality and to be constrained by necessity as we are (A1), and (2) disallowing or prohibiting evils is a necessary condition for God to be wholly good (A2)?

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<sup>8</sup> William Wainwright, "Jonathan Edwards, William Rowe, and the Necessity of Creation," in Jeff Jordan and Daniel Howard-Snyder (eds.), *Faith, Freedom, and Rationality* (Boston: Rowman & Littlefield, 1996); Wainwright, *Philosophy of Religion* (2<sup>nd</sup> edn., Wadsworth, 1999); Rowe, *Can God Be Free?*, 113–127;

We are not justified to claim either A1 or A2. The concept that God is constrained by necessity here should strike us as something implausible. God has free will, and is not confined to act within the law of causality and thus is not constrained by necessity, as Vatican I recognizes.<sup>9</sup> His omnipotence only enhances his freedom of choice and action outside the law of causality and necessity. If we know anything about God, we know that he can, and often, act with free will. It is not out of any necessity that he creates light. It is not out of any necessity that he creates humankind in his own image. Being omnipotent and omniscient only makes God's freedom a perfect and absolute one.

If God creates the world and humankind at will, he can also allow evils at will. Even if being wholly good produces some reasons for him to prevent evil, nothing is ontologically and existentially impossible about him acting otherwise. Existentially, God's toleration of evils and Christ's turning some water—but not all water—into wine uncover the same divine nature: freedom and free will beyond the law of causality.

The concept that God's disallowance of evils is a necessary condition for God to be wholly good should strike us as implausible. As indicated in the discussion of NC2 above, this concept first contradicts the idea that God is *a priori* wholly good and also the idea that God's nature is eternal and permanent: nothing God does and chooses to do changes his nature. Hermeneutically, this concept is also inconsistent with what we read from the Bible, and other religious texts. In *the Bible*, God tolerates evils. Indeed, in *Job* (in *the Bible*), God even allows Satan to visit Job and his family with sufferings and evils in order to demonstrate Job's integrity and persistency in faith to Satan. In classical Buddhist texts, we also read that the Buddha is all powerful and perfectly good and compassionate, and yet Buddha can tolerate things that the world cannot tolerate.

The content of the act of allowing is relevant here. God's allowance of evils can mean that God does not act to stop or eliminate evils. It does not mean either that God does evils or that God endorses evils. In addition, to allow evils may mean simply that God is yet to eliminate evils. It does not mean either that God cannot eliminate evils or that God does not want to eliminate evils. If I allow my office to be presently disordered, it does not mean that I like disorder or that I cannot put my office in order or that I do not want to put my office in order. It can well be the case that I will put my office in order later on.

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<sup>9</sup> Rowe, *Can God Be Free?*, 128.

Admittedly, God's allowance of evils lets evils continue to exist in the God-filled human world, e.g., God's allowance of Satan is the reason that Satan still exists. However, this fact does not alter the other fact that God can allow evils and his allowance of evils does not make him less good. It also does not imply that since God tolerates evils, we are obliged to, and should, tolerate evils. Instead, it might well be that God tolerates evils to leave humankind some homework to do: to grow in knowledge of good and evil by engaging and combating evils.

One may argue that the concept of being wholly good implies the idea of doing only good, as Rowes's argument that "since God is a perfect being, God has to create the best of all possible worlds because of his nature" suggests; doing only good implies disallowing evils. This argument might not stand.

The concept of doing only good implies only that one does not do evil; it does not imply that one acts to prevent others from doing evils. More crucial, were it that being perfectly and fully good implies disallowing evils, it would mean one of the following two principles or both are true: (1) If a being X allows evils and a being Y disallow evils, Y is necessarily a better being than X; and (2) if a being X allows evils, his or her or its act of allowing evils necessarily changes his or her or its being or nature to make it less perfect and less good. But neither principle (1) nor principle (2) are necessarily true here. For example, Buddha allows evils, and some of us do not. Does this fact make some of us better than Buddha? Few of us would claim so. In the Bible, God allows evils. Christ Jesus allows evils. Does this biblical view indicate that some of us are better than God or Christ Jesus if some of us have zero tolerance of evils?

In connection with this, the concept that being wholly good implies prohibiting evils may beg the question. If we argue that prohibiting evils is a property of being wholly good, then we presuppose what we are to argue for and demonstrate. If we argue that prohibiting evils is a necessary condition of being wholly good, we also presuppose what we are to argue for and demonstrate. If we do not evoke either argument, we have no argument anymore.

In addition to the above, to claim that an omnipotent and a wholly good God *necessarily rejects* evil is to claim that God necessarily rejects what is contrary to his own nature. But this claim is not necessarily true. To claim that God necessarily does X in given circumstance is to claim that God is also constrained by the law of causality. If God is not constrained by the law of causality, he does not necessarily do anything. God is not

constrained by the law of causality, and therefore God does not necessarily do anything, including eliminating evils.

God does not necessarily disallow what is contrary to his own nature. Suppose God is omnipotent and wholly great, is there any thing logically and existentially inconsistent in the fact that he permits what is small, even pointlessly small? Can we not reasonably assume that God can be both wholly great and tolerant toward what is small, even pointlessly small?

Suppose God is omnipotent and sweet, is there anything logically and existentially inconsistent that he allows what is bitter to exist? Can we not reasonably say that God can be both wholly sweet and tolerant toward what is bitter?

Suppose God is omnipotent and wholly happy, is there anything logically inconsistent that he permits unhappiness to exist? Can we not reasonably think that God is wholly happy and tolerant toward what is unhappy or causes unhappiness?

Therefore, by analogy, suppose God is omnipotent and wholly good, is there anything logically and existentially inconsistent or impossible in him allowing evils to exist in the God-filled human world, granted that evil is the antithesis of good? The answer should be negative. God does not always reject what is contrary to his nature.

At the end of the day, once we abandon both the assumption that God always acts on necessity (or is confined to the law of necessity) or is constrained by the law of causality, and the assumption that prohibiting evils is a necessary condition for God to be wholly good, we resolve the logical problem. While being wholly good still allows the possibility that God permits evils, being omnipotent allows God totally freedom to allow evils.

In other words, the fact that the human world is evil-afflicted may indicate that God can disallow evils but he chooses not to do so; evils exist because God allows them to exist; allowing evils is not an indication of the limit of God's power and knowledge or the limit of God's goodness, but an indication of his freedom, tolerance, and toleration. Perhaps, God might have also other good reasons. Nonetheless, his tolerant nature can be a sufficient reason for him to be tolerant toward evils.

### III.

From the existential perspective, we should now examine the evidential argument. The argument is succinctly put forth by Rowe. The standard evidential argument runs as followings: (1) There exist instances of intense sufferings which an omnipotent, omniscient being could have prevented

without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worst (SEA1); (2) An omniscient, wholly good being would prevent the occurrence of any intense suffering it could, unless it could not do so without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worse (SEA2); (3) There does not exist an omnipotent, omniscient, wholly good being (SEA3).<sup>10</sup>

The core of the standard evidential argument is the belief that an omnipotent, omniscient God necessarily disallows pointless evils. In other words, in the argument, it is claimed that even if God may permit some evils for greater good or in order to avoid greater evils or equally bad evils, a fully powerful and perfectly good God still will not possibly permit any pointless evils.

The first thing to be noted is that morally, the argument is perfectly sound. However, existentially, this argument presupposes what the logical problem argument also presupposes: a fully powerful and perfectly good God is constrained by the necessity to promote good and prevent evils. By this token, the reasons that we evoke to reject the logical problem argument above can also be evoked here to reject the evidential argument: existentially, God is not constrained by necessity but can act from free will; eliminating evils is not a necessary condition for an eternal God to be fully good and fully powerful. Again, the flaw in Rowe's argument is not that it faults God for what is logically impossible, but that it inserts the logical impossibility of the co-existence of two mutually contradictory states of affairs; that it has not drawn a distinction between cognitive logic and existential logic.

In addition, as noted by Eric Reitan and others, Rowe's argument entails utilitarianism.<sup>11</sup> Rowe's premise (1), SEA1 above, makes a utilitarian claim: God ought to prevent a given evil provided that no greater evils or equally bad or worse evils will be produced by God's action. In other words, the "ought" that God should subscribe to is a result of a utilitarian reasoning. But God is not utilitarian. Rowe's premise (2), SEA2 above, also makes a utilitarian claim: God necessarily will prevent a given evil provided that no greater evils or equally bad or worse evils will be produced by God's action. In other words, the necessity of God's act of prevention of evils is a conclusion of a utilitarian calculation of the balance-sheet of the consequence of preventing evils. But God neither needs to act from

<sup>10</sup> William Rowe, "Evil and Theodicy", in *Philosophy of Religion*, 317.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Eric Reitan, "Does the Argument from Evil Assume a Consequentialist Morality?" in *Faith and Philosophy*, 17:3 (2000): 304—317.

necessity nor to be a utilitarian when he considers acting or abstaining from action.

In short, the standard evidential argument, as summarized by Rowe, can stand if and only if we grant what we do not grant to the logical problem argument—that is, God is subject to the law of causality and necessity and that God is a utilitarian. But we cannot, and should not, grant either of these claims.

Today, a new form of evidential argument is that the actual magnitude and distribution of evils in the human world that we live in constitutes evidence against the theist claim concerning God's existence. That is, God cannot possibly allow evils of present magnitude and global distribution. By this token, God's allowance of Satan's visiting Job with unbearable suffering and evils is possible because of the small scale of the evil. The genocides in Auschwitz, Nanjing, Rwanda, Kosovo, Bosnia, East Timor, Darfur and similar indicate the absence of God. They raise not only the question, "Why are times so dark, men know each other not at all?", as asked by the French poet Eustache Deschamps in the fourteenth century, but also the question, "Where was God in Auschwitz?", as asked by Jürgen Habermas.<sup>12</sup>

Does the actual magnitude and distribution of evils in our world add new weight to the evidential argument against theism? It does not. How evils exist in the world does alter the fact that the claims NC1, NC2, and NC3 that I make earlier remain valid: (1) God has three will and is not confined to the law of causality and not constrained by necessity; (2) prohibiting evils is not a necessary condition for God to be wholly good; (3) the compatibility problem does not exist in a relation between a limitless, infinite being and limited, finite beings. In my opinion, the new evidential argument would have some force if God were not omnipotent. That is, if God were not omnipotent, there would be a limit to what God could tolerate or endure, and the actual magnitude and distribution of evils in the human world could be something beyond God's capacity to tolerate. However, the limit of the capacity of humankind is not the limit of God's capacity.

By this token, perhaps, we can ask if the existence of evils—either pointless ones or those with horrible magnitude and distribution—is something beyond what God's moral sensibility will possibly allow. Again, this question presupposes that God is not omnipotent and omniscient—that

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<sup>12</sup> Deschamps' question is quoted in Eric and Mary Josephson, (eds.), *Man Alone* (New York: Dell, 1962), 17; for Habermas's question, see Jürgen Habermas, *Religion and Rationality*, ed. & trans. Eudardo Mendieta (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2002), 154,

is, there is still something beyond God's capacity, viz. moral sensibility. While this question might not be unreasonable in itself, to use this question to argue that God is either not omnipotent or not omniscient will amount to begging the question.

All the same, to the evidential argument, a reasonable counter-argument stands: the existence of evils is not evidence against the existence of God if we believe (1) that God has free will and (2) God is capable of tolerating evils. And we can believe in both.

#### IV.

In light of the above, one path opened but not taken is the toleration argument that evils exist because God tolerates them; God can tolerate evils because God has free will and is tolerant. And I suspect that God tolerates evils in order to give humankind a quiz or mid-term examination. Since the Fall, humankind has manifested the propensity to make judgments on good and evil. God knows that humankind has not yet gained sufficient knowledge of good and evil and intends humankind to grow by combat evils—that is, he tolerates evils in order for humankind to learn something about good and evil more comprehensively and systematically.

If God tolerates evils because he is tolerant, then the existence of evils will not be evidence against God's existence, or logically incompatible with the fact that God exists. This is nothing unreasonable or mysterious. What we need to see here is the difference between existential incompatibility and cognitive incompatibility. Cognitively, two contradictory claims to the same truth cannot be both true. Thus, here, we do not claim both that God necessarily excludes evils and that God tolerates evils. However, existentially, two opposing states of affairs can co-exist. Thus, here, it is possible that God considers evils to be evils and thinks that humankind should reject evils and simultaneously, that God himself does not prevent or eliminate evils for humankind, but tolerates their existence in the human world. And as far as God is concerned, tolerance can be a good and comprehensible reason.

God may have extrinsic reasons to tolerate evils. For example, he may tolerate evils for the greater good or to avoid greater evils. Or, according to my most favored guess, in tolerating evils God is giving humankind a quiz or mid-term. Job's case is an example at hand. God tolerated Satan's visiting Job with suffering and evils because God wanted to give the test to demonstrate to Satan that Satan is wrong. The Chinese Confucian master Mencius offered a view akin to that concerning Job in *the*

*Bible*, though with some minor differences. According to Mencius, before Heaven entrusts a great responsibility to a person, it will first test the person in body, mind, and spirit.<sup>13</sup> The French writer Victor Hugo also said, "Life, misfortunes, isolation, abandonment, poverty, are battlefields which have their heroes; obscure heroes, sometimes greater than the illustrious heroes. Strong and rare natures are thus created; misery, almost a step-mother, is sometimes a mother; privation gives birth to power of soul and mind; distress is the nurse of self-respect; misfortune is a good breast for great souls."<sup>14</sup> The question, "Where was God in Auschwitz?", can find a Menciusian answer: God was testing humankind; God was where he was when Job was tested.

All the same, suffice it to say that God has free will and is capable of tolerating and therefore may tolerate evils. The case that God may have other reasons to tolerate evils is not incompatible with the view that God tolerates evils out of his tolerant nature. With reference to contemporary philosophical debates, it is better for us to recognize that God has free will and is capable of tolerating what is impossible to the world and finite human beings than to entertain the belief that something is logically impossible to God.

A few clarifications are in order. First, God's toleration of evils will not damage his full goodness or undermine his omnipotence, but is consistent with his eternal nature. That God is *a priori* eternal should be a non-negotiable truth. In other words, given God's eternal nature, we cannot be justified in the claim that if God tolerated evils God would be less good than a being that would not tolerate evils.

Second, God's toleration of evils is not indifference to evils. "Tolerance is not indifference."<sup>15</sup> God's toleration of evils is also not an indication that God has not drawn a distinction between good and evils. Thus, for example, God has a distinction between good and evils when he allows Satan to test Job by visiting Jobs with sufferings and evils. Buddha has a distinction between good and evil although Buddha tolerates evils. Toleration means to bear intellectually, ethically-morally, and politically with what is worthy of rejection, in an engaging manner.

Third, God's toleration of evils would involve allowing evils to exist, not participating in doing evils or approving evils or endorsing evils. The

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<sup>13</sup> Mencius, *The Essence and Substance of Mencius (Mengzi Zheng Yi)*, ed. Jiao Shun, in *Completed Works of Teachers (Zhu Zi Ji Cheng)*, vol. 1 (Beijing: Unity Publishing House, 1996), 6B15.

<sup>14</sup> Victor Hugo, *Les Misérables* (New York: The Modern Library, 1992), 588.

<sup>15</sup> Habermas, *Between Naturalism and Religion*, 258.

act of toleration of evils is an intermediate act between outright prohibition and endorsement of evils. Thomas Scanlon points out: "Tolerance requires us to accept people and permit their practices even when we strongly disapprove of them. Tolerance thus involves an attitude that is intermediate between wholehearted acceptance and unrestrained opposition."<sup>16</sup> By this token, God's toleration of evils is an intermediate act between outright prohibition of evils and endorsement of evils. For the purpose of the present study, God's toleration of evils does not indicate that God conceives evils in humankind and in the human world.

Fourth, the fact that evils are what God would reject qualifies, instead of disqualifying, them as the objects of God's toleration. X is an object of toleration if and only if X is always something that the tolerator would reject or wants to reject. Jürgen Habermas thus says, "Rejection is a condition necessary for all kinds of tolerant behavior."<sup>17</sup> Bernard Williams also says, "Toleration, we may say, is required only for the intolerable."<sup>18</sup> Of course, this is not to say that evils are intolerable to God in terms of his capacity or perfect goodness. Instead, it is to say that evils can be the objects of his toleration precisely because he would have rejected them.

Fifth, being tolerant is a sufficient reason for God to tolerate evils. In other words, given his free will, God may tolerate evils simply because he is tolerant. This is true even of toleration of what Rowe calls pointless evils or evils of such horrible magnitude and distribution as we have today. Given that what can be the object of one's toleration must be that which one would like to reject, the fact that evil is something which God would like to reject qualifies evil as a possible object of God's toleration.

Sixth, the toleration argument does not introduce any myths here. Nothing is mysterious and incomprehensible in God tolerating evils simply because he is tolerant. Is there any thing mysterious if a person tolerates a bad smell because he is tolerant? Is there anything mysterious if one bears with a bad neighborhood simply because one is tolerant? Is there anything mysterious if being tolerant, one tolerates another person who advocates at the top of his lungs what one opposes at the top of one's lungs for one's entire life?

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<sup>16</sup> Thomas Scanlon, *the Difficulty of Tolerance* (Cambridge, UK: The University of Cambridge Press, 2003), 187.

<sup>17</sup> Jürgen Habermas, "Religious Tolerance—the Pacemaker for Cultural Rights," in *Philosophy*, 79, no. 1 (spring 2004), 10; Cf. Habermas, *Between Naturalism and Religion*, 258–259.

<sup>18</sup> Bernard Williams, "Toleration: An Impossible Virtue?" in David Heyd (ed.), *Toleration: An Elusive Virtue* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1996), 18.

Seventh, even if God tolerates evils, it does not follow that he wants us to tolerate evils. Instead, it might well be that he tolerates evils in order to give humankind some homework to do—that is, to grow in knowledge of good and evils by engaging and combating evils. In other words, the toleration argument here does not undermine or damage the distinction between good and evil, or undermine the fact that for God humankind ought to aspire for what good and ought to reject what is evil.

The toleration argument here is consistent with our daily experience. In comparison, cognitive arguments that attempt to discredit the fact that evils exist should strike us as something too dry. Meanwhile, the toleration argument is not an extrinsic-reason argument, but focuses on God's nature itself. In addition, as demonstrated above, the toleration argument can explain away both the logical problem argument and the evidential argument. Furthermore, the toleration argument can account for those traditional defenses of theism, without inheriting their problems. For example, the argument that God allows evils for the sake of greater good can be explained by the toleration argument.

## V.

I would like to conclude this paper as follows. We should draw a distinction between a reasonable concept of God and a rational concept of God. A reasonable concept of God claims only existential plausibility. A rational concept of God includes a stronger claim: the claim that such a concept is, and can be, cognitively justified to be true. A reasonable concept of God allows one to subscribe to the concept of God in faith. A rational concept of God, which makes a knowledge claim, demands that one should and can subscribe to a concept of God if and only if one can recognize and prove its truth.

By this token, the concept that an omnipotent, omniscient God may tolerate evils is a reasonable one. What the concept claims or demonstrates has strong existential plausibility. It is acceptable, particularly when we recognize that existence consists of contradictions. Subscription to this concept supports us to continue to have faith in God amid evils, as Job did, and improves our faith and life. And such a concept can respond to the contemporary debate over whether God exists amid evils. More crucial, it is my contention that if God tolerates what humankind cannot and should not tolerate, our view on the logical problem argument and evidential argument should be adjusted. The logical problem argument should take into account the difference between the unacceptability of logical contradiction

in cognition and the acceptability of existential contradiction. The evidential argument should take into account the difference between the undesirability of the co-existence of an omnipotent, omniscient God and evils and the impossibility of such co-existence.

By this token, we can, and should, question three concepts: (1) that an omnipotent, wholly good God *necessarily* allows only good, but not evil at any time; (2) that prohibition of evils is a necessary act which God must perform in order to be wholly good; and (3) that there can be a compatibility-incompatibility problem in a relation between an infinite, limitless being and finite, limited beings. Although these concepts are morally appealing, in my opinion, none of them is free of dubious assumptions. In other words, none of these three concepts can be taken for granted to have truth.

Meanwhile, we should recover and restore three concepts: (1) that God's activities and choices are totally free from the law of causality and not constrained by necessity, or in the phrase of Vatican I, are "by a volition free from all necessity"; (2) that God is tolerant and can tolerate anything; and (3) that toleration is not identical to endorsement.

Doing so, we can reasonably assume that God exists in an evil-afflicted world if he chooses to do so and if he tolerates evils. We can reasonably argue that he does exist in an evil-afflicted world because he chooses to tolerate evils for whatever reasons. I would like to make a stronger claim: he tolerates evils in order to give humankind a chance to grow in knowledge of good and evils by combating evils, which implies that his toleration of evils imposes a task on humankind to combat evils.