

Creation Order Theodicy: The Argument for the Coexistence of Gratuitous Evil and the Sovereignty of God

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Abstract

The argument for the coexistence of gratuitous evil and the doctrine of the sovereignty of God is ardent amongst scholars. This article seeks to examine Bruce Little's Creation Order theodicy and its claim that gratuitous evil exists concurrently with the sovereignty of God.

Upon exploring prominent greater good theodicies and enumerating both their strengths and weaknesses, Little's justification for his Creation Order theodicy is posited, followed by the content of the theodicy. The Creation Order theodicy is then evaluated against prominent greater good theodicies and contemporary theodical viewpoints. Lastly, the Creation Order theodicy is evaluated as a valid explanation for the concurrence of gratuitous evil and the sovereignty of God.

This article contends that Little's Creation Order theodicy does offer a valid argument for the existence of gratuitous evil concurrent with the doctrine of the sovereignty of God. Further, the Creation Order theodicy addresses many of the questions which plague theodicy and it does so in a manner which is biblically consistent. The Creation Order theodicy, with its

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¹ The views expressed herein are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the beliefs of the South African Theological Seminary.

associated gratuitous evil, offers a compelling answer to those who are experiencing evil or ministering to those experiencing evil.

1. Introduction

The Creation Order theodicy maintains that gratuitous evil exists concurrently with the sovereignty of God. If the argument for the coexistence of gratuitous evil and the sovereignty of God is determined to be valid, it would prove to alter not only the explanation for evil but also how people should be biblically counselled when they encounter evil. Validation of the argument would result in acute implications for erroneously telling people that God has a purpose for whatever they may be going through, that God works every situation out for the good or that God will bring something good out of their trouble. The goal is to evaluate Little's theodicy and thus his claim that gratuitous evil exists concurrently with the sovereignty of God. The methodology chosen for the evaluation is a dialectical inquiry. The dialectical inquiry examines existing theories, and compares and contrasts them to illuminate areas for suggested modification (Berniker 2006:645). Little's theodicy is analysed against several theistic greater good theodicies and the biblical text. The evaluation provides insight into how well Little overcomes perceived deficiencies in competing theodicies.

Little proposes the Creation Order theodicy as a better answer to the problem of evil. The Creation Order theodicy integrates the concepts of creation order, libertarian freedom, the best of all possible worlds and middle knowledge. Little claims the Creation Order theodicy affirms a Christian worldview, provides for the existence of gratuitous evil and maintains the sovereignty of God. According to the Creation Order theodicy, there is an omnipotent, omniscient and wholly good and sovereign God who allows gratuitous evil as a by-product of creating the best of all worlds.

2. An Overview of the Greater Good Theodicy

Greater good theodicies are prominent in the history of monotheistic Christian thought. Such theodicies maintain that there are arguments for the existence of God (Little 2005:31). Further, they are committed to a profile of God as omnipotent, omniscient and omnibenevolent. A greater good theodicy is one in which God allows evil to happen. This evil will be used to bring about a greater good or to prevent an evil equal to or greater than the evil permitted (p. 1). A greater good theodicy claims that the

good obtained from an evil justifies that evil (Peterson 1998:89). Greater good theodicies are based on the premise that gratuitous evil does not exist. Gratuitous evil is that evil from which God does not obtain a greater good, nor does he stop an equal or greater evil from being perpetrated by allowing the evil in question (Hasker 2008:178). This line of thought is contingent on a meticulous application of the doctrine of God's sovereignty. The understanding of God's sovereignty in the greater good theodicies is that because God is sovereign, everything in this life has a divine purpose (Little 2005:2).

In support of a greater good theodicy in historical theology, Augustine insists that 'God judged it better to bring good out of evil than to suffer no evil to exist' (1955:§5.11). Hick alleges that Augustine has presented the problem of evil but has not resolved the problem (1992:219). Similarly to Augustine, Aquinas argues that God is omnipotent and all-good and thus cannot allow any gratuitous evil (2014:§1.3.1). Aquinas' argument is one of deduction, says Middleton, and is a very problematic argument when considering the evidence of actual evil (1997:86). Leibniz contends that this is the best of all possible worlds and in being the best, the evils must be allowed by God so that the greater good can be derived. God would be at fault if he did not allow the evils (Leibniz 1996:91). While agreeing with Leibniz that this is the best of all possible worlds, Little posits that all evil does not result in the greater good being derived, some evil is gratuitous (2010:33). In contemporary scholarship, support and debate continue regarding a greater good theodicy. According to Hick, the good obtained from an evil could never have taken place unless the evil precipitated, making the evil necessary for God (1978:176). While admitting that the good obtained from an evil may not always be shown evidentially, he maintains that one must appeal to mystery in one's understanding of the good obtained (369-370). Also denying the existence of gratuitous evil, Wykstra insists that there is an epistemic difference between God and humans, humans not having reasonable epistemic access to the knowledge of the good being obtained with each evil (1984:152). Alston (1991:26) and Howard-Snyder (1996:§8009) echo the thoughts of Wykstra. To the scholars who have appealed to mystery and epistemic distance, Little asks, if God sees things differently than humans, how can a human know if they are doing good (2005:108)? A person would have to have the same understanding of the definition of good. Conversely, in denying the existence of gratuitous evil, Swinburne goes so far as to say, 'we falsely suppose that it is logically possible for an omnipotent God to bring about the good without the bad' (1998:33). MacGregor considers the argument that evil is

necessary for God to bring about good an absurdity (2012:118). The necessity of evil to bring about a good, transforms the universe into a ‘philosophically overdetermined system’ containing hidden benefits assigned to individual evils (p.118). Geisler and Bocchino do not accept the existence of gratuitous evil, suggesting that God knows a good purpose for every evil which he allows, and the end justifies the means (2001:222). To the contrary, in justifying the evil via the good obtained, Flemming argues that this is incompatible with the ‘moral task which religion gives to God’ (1988:7). Gould approaches the issue of gratuitous evil from a different perspective. He argues that if God must allow evil in order to have a meaningful relationship with humankind, then the evil is still for a greater good, that of enabling relationship (2014:461). However, Erlandson contends that before the fall, God had a meaningful relationship with people, thus evil was not necessary to the relationship (1991:5). Therefore, there seems to be strong historical and contemporary support for a greater good theodicy, as well as robust opposition to a greater good theodicy.

3. Little’s response to the greater good theodicy

Little is a strong proponent of the existence of gratuitous evil, and thus responds to the argument which greater good theodicies make against gratuitous evil. Extrapolating from the greater good theodicy position, if an evil were found to be gratuitous, then the conclusion would be that God is not sovereign and in control (Little 2005:3). If a gratuitous evil existed, then God must not be morally justified in allowing that evil. Little finds this position of the greater good theodicies to be fallacious. To deny that any evil is gratuitous, Little contends that one must be able to evidentially prove that all evil results in a greater good. The greater good theodicies’ position becomes quite questionable, because in attempting to protect the character of God, namely his sovereignty, the greater good theodicies raise concerns about a God who would allow such things as the Holocaust when no observable greater good has ever obtained from that extensive evil. Furthermore, if no gratuitous evil exists, and some evils are allowed because they prevent a worse evil, then God must not be omnipotent. According to the greater good theodicies, God requires one evil in order to prevent another evil, making evil necessary for God. The greater good theodicies assume that if gratuitous evil exists, then the sovereignty of an omnipotent and omnibenevolent God would be challenged (Little 2005:7). Little concludes his objection to the greater good theodicies’ tenet of no gratuitous evil stating ‘therefore, denying gratuitous evil, which is intended to protect the

character of God (particularly his sovereignty) in the end, accomplishes just the opposite and raises serious questions for the greater good theodicy as a whole' (p. 3). In particular, Little finds Augustine's reasoning to be illogical. Augustine begins his argument with a view of God's providence and goodness which prevent God from allowing any evil from which a greater good does not obtain (Little 2005:39). This is deductive reasoning and does not consider the evidence of evil. Similarly, Little contends that Aquinas' argument is 'built on an assumption of inference, namely, that an omnipotent and all-good God cannot allow anything in his creation that does not serve a good purpose' (Little 2005:45). Little finds Leibniz' explanation to be deductive as well (2010:33). Leibniz assumes that an all-good God would actualise the best of all possible worlds, and that world would only have evil which served to obtain a greater good. Little asserts that these arguments do not consider the evidence from apparent gratuitous evil. Regarding Hick and Swinburne and their appeal to mystery, Little denounces this line of thinking, stating:

I think it is theologically questionable to appeal to mystery in order to ignore blatant contradictions in our theological systems. I say this because one test for truth is internal consistency; that is, different parts of our theological systems must cohere, and if they do not, it is reason to believe at some point our system has gone awry (Little 2010:39).

An appeal to mystery is an insufficient explanation for the reason there appear to be gratuitous evils. Little does not object to inferential arguments unless there is not sufficient evidence to make the inference, as in the case of the greater good theodicy denying the existence of gratuitous evil (2005:106). The greater good theodicy have, in Little's view, committed inferential fallacies in appealing to God's sovereignty as a reason to deny the existence of gratuitous evil.

4. Little's argument of theodicy for gratuitous evil and God's sovereignty

Little's belief in the existence of gratuitous evil comes as an outworking of his Creation Order theodicy. Foundational to Little's theodicy are creation order, libertarian freedom, the best of all possible worlds and middle knowledge. Little combines these elements to construct his theodicy. Recognizing the ontological difference between God and humans, the Creation Order theodicy establishes the mechanism by which God and humans can be in relationship (Little 2010:85). This relationship requires the self-

limiting aspect of God's sovereignty, thus providing for and protecting people's libertarian freedom as well as the potential for gratuitous evil (Little 2005:166; 2010:112, 117).

4.1. Creation order

The first element of the Creation Order theodicy is creation order. Creation order is the position that creation is ordered by God, providing rules which allow beings who are ontologically different to have a meaningful and volitional relationship (Little 2010:85). Little finds that the Bible delineates the rules of creation order and assigns associated penalties for violating the rules (2010:87; cf. Deut 28–30). Within the creation order, humans can make free choices from the limited choices made available. These limits define the 'moral framework' in which humans can operate. A human operating within this framework has an authentic mind and libertarian freedom, able to influence history while also functioning within the parameters which God has set. The authentic mind of a person includes their ability to make judgments (p. 86). This framework allows God to achieve his overarching plan while assuring the free will of people.

Creation order includes covenant ordering. Included in the covenants are those by which God has limited himself (Little 2010:91). Covenantal limiting is seen in both Genesis 3:15 and 9:11. In Genesis 9, God is found to limit himself in how he would deal with future punishment and the earth. He willingly chose to limit himself by declaring that he would never again destroy the earth by a flood. This type of covenantal limiting demonstrates that God has certain covenants which he has made with humans or certain groups of humans. Through choosing to be in the covenant, God willingly limits himself. The limitation is not due to a lack in his omnipotence, but rather in his express willingness to be in a covenant. This self-restraint on the part of God is for the benefit of humanity. The covenants 'contribute to the structure within which libertarian freedom operates' while simultaneously assuring the 'end will be as God promised' (p. 91).

4.2. Libertarian freedom

Little opts to use the term libertarian freedom in lieu of 'free will'. He suggests that the term, 'free will', is confusing. Libertarian freedom is a more restricted and specific term (Little 2010:14). Libertarian freedom means that people have the ability to make choices and consequently, cause events. A choice may be influenced by an antecedent choice or event, potentially limiting the choices people have under the understanding of libertarian freedom.

People can make ‘authentic choices’ from within the allotted options, which have been either limited by antecedent choices or events, the providence of God, or creation order. Little concludes that, regarding a person, their choices may be limited, but not their ability to choose (2010:14). The parameters of libertarian freedom are governed by creation order. People have limits on choices and legitimate use of their libertarian freedom (2010:88). The covenants which God has freely entered into contribute to how libertarian freedom is exercised. The covenants assure that the overarching plan of God will be obtained, while libertarian freedom is simultaneously maintained (p. 98).

4.3. The best of all possible worlds and middle knowledge

Little finds the concept of the best of all possible worlds critical to the development of his theodicy. In the development of theodicy, accepting the concept of the best of all possible worlds leads to internal consistency and lessens tensions which are created if one rejects the best of all possible worlds concept (Little 2005:103). Leibniz’ concept of the best of all possible worlds is one to which Little ascribes while not adopting all of Leibniz’ criteria (p. 45). In Leibniz theodicy, God is all powerful and all good and therefore can only create that which is good. When choosing to create, God must, by his nature, create that which is best (1996:61). Little reasons, ‘logically deduced then, what God has created is not only good ontologically, it was the best of all the possible worlds’ (2005:45).

Little qualifies the meaning of the word ‘possible’ in speaking of the best of all possible worlds. There are limitations on what type of world could actually exist and on what is created. All worlds are not possible, such as one that has all free moral agents who would obey God (Little 2005:151). Creation is likewise limited because it is contingent while God is necessary. The contingent can never be equal to the necessary.

Essential to the concept of the best of all possible worlds is the middle knowledge of God. God’s knowledge, or omniscience, is comprised of three types of knowledge (Little 2005:146). God’s knowledge can be natural, free, and middle. Intrinsic to God is his natural knowledge. Consequently, Little explains, God actualised the world which exists due to his natural knowledge of all the possible worlds God’s knowledge of everything about the actualised world is his free knowledge. Free knowledge is ‘comprised of contingent truths’ (p. 146). Middle knowledge affirms the sovereignty of God while allowing for the libertarian freedom of humans. Middle knowledge is the knowledge which God has of all

counterfactuals of his free moral agents. This middle knowledge means that God knows all possible 'contingents stemming from the free choices' of his free moral agents under any set of circumstances (p. 146). Knowing all the possible contingents allowed God to select the best combination of contingents, thereby selecting or actualizing the best of all possible worlds (p. 147). Although middle knowledge is controversial, Little believes there are 'good and sufficient reasons' to accept the concept of middle knowledge.²

In considering which world, or combination of choices, to actualise, God had the ability to know all undetermined acts of his free moral agents. In choosing which world to actualise, the rules of creation order had to be considered and applied to each set of counterfactuals (Little 2005:148). Included in the counterfactuals are prayer, answers to prayer and all other events which are permitted within the creation order. The world which was actualised is the entire course of humanity from creation to the 'realization of the Kingdom of God' (p. 150). Because God applied the rules of creation order to each contingent world, by his middle knowledge he knew which choices people would make. His actualization of the best of the possible contingent worlds maintains his sovereignty while preserving the libertarian freedom of people. The best of all possible worlds eliminates the greater good theodicies appeal to mystery (p. 148).

Little discusses two main reasons why he deems this the best of all possible worlds. From Genesis 1:31, where God pronounced that all which he had made was 'very good', Little finds this statement to be evaluative and reflective of the character and nature of God (2005:152). The second reason he discusses is the limited nature of contingent free moral agents, humans. Only God is a necessary and perfect being. The created human is contingent and therefore limited. The limitation is not a flaw but an ontological condition (p. 155). The turning of humans away from God is not caused by this ontological limitation. However, the limitation is the condition which makes it possible for one to turn away from God. In maintaining the best of all possible worlds, Little finds that it is best for contingent agents to have a free moral choice (libertarian freedom) than for them to lack this ability to choose. Although humans are ontologically limited, making it possible to turn away from God, it is better that humans have libertarian freedom in lieu of their choices being determined by God.

2 *The Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms* defines middle knowledge as '(Lat. *scientia media*) A concept developed by the Jesuit Luis de Molina (1535-1600) concerning God's conditioned and consequent knowledge of future events. God foreknows how each person will cooperate with grace.' Modern proponents of middle knowledge include MacGregor in 'Can Little's creation-order theodicy be reconciled with sovereign individual predestination?', Craig in 'A middle knowledge perspective on biblical inspiration' and Geisler and Corduan in 'Philosophy of religion'.

5. Little's argument for gratuitous evil

Having explained his view of the foundational elements, Little constructed his Creation Order theodicy, stating, 'I think it is safe to say every theodicy touches all other major Christian doctrines, so this is no small matter' (2010:104). His theodicy acknowledges the existence of gratuitous evil, but demonstrates that the evil does not count against the 'moral perfection of God' (p. 103). In the development of the Creation Order theodicy, Little sought to answer for the weaknesses which he found in the examined greater good theodicies. His Creation Order theodicy does not leave one always looking for the greater good in a bad situation, hoping that one's suffering has some meaning. In lieu of the greater good, Little contends that the sufferer, if a believer, should seek the comfort and mercy of God during such time. It is this comfort and mercy that will sustain a believer through suffering. One should not be burdened with trying to ascertain what good is being derived from the suffering. 2 Corinthians 1:3–4 and 12:9 intimate this very idea, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.'³ Similarly, Little's Creation Order theodicy erases another issue created by greater good theodicies: The God who is called upon to ease suffering is the same God who wills the suffering to take place. The Creation Order theodicy does not make God responsible for willing the suffering. Thus, the disparity is eliminated.

³ All reference to scripture will be taken from the English Standard Version (ESV), unless otherwise stated.

Common among greater good theodicies is the idea that gratuitous evil does not exist, as it would indicate that God is not truly sovereign (Little 2010:104). Little contends that gratuitous evil does exist and that while God does allow everything that happens on the earth, he is justified in allowing even gratuitous evil. This position maintains Little's belief in gratuitous evil and in the sovereignty of God. Since the human, and thus his mind, is contingent, it is a mind which is limited. For God to interact with the limited, material and created human, he must employ some 'self-imposed restraint (not requiring any change in essence)' in the way some of his attributes are evidenced in the contingent, created reality (Little 2010:105). Creation order is the structure which God built to allow this engagement with humanity. In choosing to create, God set up covenants within the creation order. In exercising his 'power and prerogative', he established limits to the manifestation of his attributes within created reality. He chose to limit himself (p. 107). In establishing the covenants and creation order, God must abide by the parameters which he established. Creation order allows the free moral beings in the contingent reality of creation to operate with libertarian freedom. Creation

order likewise allows for an omniscient, sovereign God to engage with material, contingent humanity (p. 105). There are two conditions under which God's attributes are exhibited. He manifests his attributes in the uncreated, necessary reality. It is in this reality that his attributes are unrestrained. Within the contingent, created reality, God's attributes are voluntarily restrained. God, in the unrestrained reality, chose to create the contingent reality. In this contingent reality, God sovereignly chose to give people libertarian freedom. For people to exercise true libertarian freedom, God willingly restrains 'the manifestation of sovereignty (and other attributes) in the created circle' (p. 105).

The Creation Order theodicy asserts that everything which happens has a reason. However, everything may not have a purpose (Little 2010:106). Purpose and reason are very different. The Holocaust had a reason, even if it did not have a purpose. The existence of gratuitous evil was the reason the Holocaust happened, though there was no divine purpose in it happening. Creation Order theodicy guarantees that even horrific evils, like the Holocaust, are explainable. Little believes the structure and application of the Creation Order theodicy silences the 'complaint that everything on earth must have a purpose' (p. 106).

While the nature of humans is to be celebrated, the choices which humans make may not be worthy of celebration. The creation order does not allow for God to sift through people's choices and only allow the good (Little 2010:109). Creation Order theodicy allows for gratuitous evil as a consequence of libertarian freedom. The environment in which God and humans can interact must either be wholly determined by God or function by a creation order. God chose the creation order by which to interact with humans. Although given libertarian freedom, humans are still limited (p. 110). Humans are limited in that God ultimately controls the course of history, and the types and number of choices from which humans can select are limited. However, the limitations do not compromise the biblical understanding of salvation. Libertarian freedom ensures that a person can freely choose to follow or reject Christ. God can use persuasion to influence the decisions of humans without violating the libertarian freedom of humans (p. 93). While the choices may be limited, as the means of salvation, the ability to choose is not. Creation order also ensures that there is a law of cause and effect in place. Galatians 6:7 assures us, 'Do not be deceived: God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap.' In some instances, God may choose to reverse the result or intent of an evil action. He does this in spite of the

evil, not because of it. While all actions do not receive the direct intervention of God, creation order allows for intervention. Creation order is not just about God possessing power, it is about how God will manifest his power within the created reality. God has voluntarily limited himself covenantally, while simultaneously leaving the choice of divine intervention open. This created order allows for people's libertarian freedom to be true, for God's sovereignty to be intact, for miracles to be possible and for the law of cause and effect to operate.

The Creation Order theodicy does not assert that all evil is gratuitous. There may be some good which results from an evil (Little 2010:115). However, the argument is that the evil was not necessary for the good. God may have reversed the intent of the evil to bring about a good in spite of that evil, not because of the evil. Creation order argues that there is no way to validate that the good which obtained could only have obtained via the evil. Concluding his argument, Little asserts that, 'the sad fact is that in this present age there is much suffering and a large measure of it is gratuitous, which seems to be exactly what one would expect in a place alienated from God' (2010:120).

6. Critique of Little's theodicy argument

The essential elements of the Creation Order theodicy are creation order, libertarian freedom, the best of all possible worlds and middle knowledge. To effectively critique Little's theodicy, the essential elements will be examined individually.

6.1. Creation order

The strengths of the creation order are that it recognises and preserves the ontological difference between God and man. MacGregor finds the concept that the uncreated God cannot transfer to his created beings the attribute of his perfection foundational to theodicy (2005:1). The very fact that the beings are created makes them limited. Olson likewise supports creation order (2010:1). Creation order holds that God is self-limiting. This self-limitation is particularly evident in the incarnation and covenant agreements. Divine determinism is avoided with the employment of creation order and divine self-limitation. Through creation order, God limits himself for the 'sake of our free will' (Olson 2009:44). If one is to deny that God is the author of sin, argues Olson, it is logically imperative to believe in the self-limitation of God via his creation order (2010:2).

The self-limitation of God essential to creation order is viewed as a weakness by some scholars (Fouts 1993; Hendryx 2018; Highfield 2002). Hass argues that 'human decision-making and divine determination' are not at the same level and should not be treated as such (2011:13). Embracing the self-limitation of God, Hass finds, is to deny God's sovereignty.

Hasker has developed a natural order in contrast to Little's creation order. While Little's creation order ascribes evil as the result of the fall of man, Hasker's natural order does not (Little 2005:139, Hasker 2008:139). Natural evil, as defined by Hasker, 'is the result of the overall order of the cosmos, an order which, taken as a whole, is good and admirable' (p. 140). The natural world has not been flawed by the sin of Adam, so to say that it has been would be to say that God did not create a good natural world (p. 203). God, in his self-limiting sovereignty, chose to refrain from directly controlling his creation. This lack of immediate control by God allows for the possibility of evil and precedes the sin of Adam (p. 143). While agreeing with the self-limiting nature of God's sovereignty, Little's creation order maintains that the sin of Adam predates the natural evil found in the world (2005:142).

6.2. Libertarian freedom

Hasker supports Little's understanding of libertarian freedom which he terms libertarian free will (2008:150). To adequately address the problem of moral evil, he insists that the libertarian understanding of free will is essential (p. 152). Agreeing with Little, Hick goes so far as to say that in order to be in relationship with God, humans must possess libertarian freedom (1978:302). Swinburne concurs with this understanding of libertarian free will, asserting that 'the natural primitive understanding of "free will" is as libertarian free will' (1998:40). Peterson echoes Little's thoughts on libertarian freedom, finding that this world requires that free moral agents can make uncoerced choices (1998:41).

Unlike Little, Phillips does not embrace an absolute libertarian free will view, one in which people are free under all circumstances to decide one way or another (2005:72). Phillips finds Little's libertarian freedom to be a weak explanation for evil in particular cases. He argues that in particular cases, the suffering allowed by God is so intense that it eradicates any semblance of a freedom to choose (p. 74). Phillips finds that theodocists, such as Little, often resort to generalizations, citing libertarian free will, in lieu of explanations in particular instances. Little would argue that libertarian freedom does exist, even in the case of horrific evils (2010:111, 112). To ask God to eliminate horrific evils requires a

judgment call on which evil is more horrific than another and by whose standard of morality the judgment would be made. Taken to its logical extension, 'if a horrific evil is horrific because of how it compares to another evil, then logically this will mean that all evil should be prevented' (p. 111).

Christensen and Hendryx hold positions antithetical to libertarian freedom. Christensen asserts that if a libertarian understanding of free will is correct, then it would limit God's sovereignty (2016:7). Likewise, Hendryx adopts a strong anti-libertarian freedom position, finding libertarian freedom to be a weakness which undermines the biblical understanding of salvation (2018:1). True freedom, as defined by Hendryx, is the compatibilist ability to be free to do what is pleasing to God (p. 2)

6.3. The best of all possible worlds and middle knowledge

While essential to Little's best of all possible worlds, Hasker (2008), Phillips (2005), and Peterson (1998) agree that theory of divine middle knowledge is a weakness for theodicy and is not a plausible theory. Hasker finds that the theory of divine middle knowledge is 'a hindrance and an obstacle to a viable doctrine of divine providence' and to constructing a viable theodicy (2008:176). Considering it to be a foundational problem, he contends that there is no way to know counterfactuals (p.67). Since a counterfactual is not actualised, then a person never chooses A or B, thus undermining the validity of the theory of middle knowledge. Phillips, in denying middle knowledge, asserts that the future is not something which exists, therefore even God cannot know that which does not exist (2005:102). Concluding his argument, he deems the concept of middle knowledge to an illusion, thus making the assertion that this is the best of all possible worlds illusive as well (p. 105). Similarly, Peterson states that God can only know things that are logically possible for him to know and the future choices of free moral agents are not logically possible to know (1998:73).

Erlandson denies that this is the best of all possible worlds, because that erroneously assumes that the world should be created in a manner that is best for man (1991:6). Further, he contends that a proper theodicy must rest on the belief that the world which is created best manifests the glory and attributes of God (p. 6). The world was actualised in a manner which best exhibits God's 'righteousness, justice, mercy and grace' (p. 6). Only a world where humanity falls from goodness to sin would allow the stated attributes of God to manifest fully. To this argument, Little would contend that Erlandson's understanding would make God reliant

on evil to obtain good (2005:170). While some instances of the good obtaining appear to require evil, Creation Order theodicy posits that under those circumstances the good obtained was not a necessary good and the associated evil was not a necessary evil (p. 101, 112). God could have brought about the good in spite of the evil.

MacGregor (2005:5), Craig (1999:45), Geisler and Corduan (1985:352) embrace the doctrine of *Scientia media*, middle knowledge. Little's account of how God chooses which world to actualise and his treatment of sovereign predestination is deemed, by MacGregor, to be a weakness in his theodicy (p. 5). By offering a revised sequence and explanation of the criteria for the world which God chooses to actualise, MacGregor attempts to protect both sovereign predestination and libertarian freedom. This revised sequence and explanation seek to marry Calvinist predestination and libertarian free will. Compared to Little, MacGregor (2005:5) and Craig (1995:9) have put stricter parameters on their definition of best, that being the 'optimal balance between belief and unbelief' (MacGregor 2005:5). Ultimately narrowing down the range of potential worlds, MacGregor establishes a set of worlds called 'salvific-moral optimal worlds' (p.5). God is now choosing from an infinite range of equally good worlds, each world containing the maximum amount of people who accept Christ compared to those who deny him, and with the minimal amount of accompanying evil (p. 5). Upon defining the set of worlds from which God can choose, MacGregor suggests that the term 'best feasible world' is more accurate than Little's 'best of all possible worlds'. MacGregor finds this differentiation to be substantive for it does not limit God to having only one world which is the best and which he can actualise but instead, provides a range of feasible worlds from which God can choose to actualise (p. 5). This is essential in the task of simultaneously protecting both the Calvinist sovereign predestination doctrine and that of libertarian freedom.

Little's concept of the best of all possible worlds defines the world as existing from the point of creation to the Kingdom which is to come (2010:97). Geisler and Corduan do not agree with Little's characterization of what constitutes the world and find it to be a weakness (1988:313). They contend that this world we live in is not the best of all possible worlds, but it is the best way for God to bring about the best possible world (p. 333). Based on the soul-making value of evil, Geisler and Corduan find that this world is the 'best way' for God to achieve the best world, the best world being a perfect Heaven (p. 356).

7. The Validity of Creation Order Theodicy

Little has constructed a theodicy which he claims acknowledges the existence of gratuitous evil while embracing the doctrine of the sovereignty of God (2005:156; 2010:114). In building his theodicy, Little addressed the definition of sovereignty. The major theistic greater good theodicies utilise an understanding of sovereignty where 'God is sovereign in such a way that all individual choices of men are only those which God directly permits' (Little 2005:105). Little understands sovereignty to be divine autonomy and utilises this understanding in his theodicy (p. 106). Mitchell agrees with both Little's definition of sovereignty and the existence of gratuitous evil (2018:5). Scripture is replete in conveying that God is sovereign, as evidenced in Job 42:2, Psalms 135:6, Daniel 4:35 and Ephesians 1:11. In his sovereignty, God gave people free will (libertarian freedom) and he permits people to act according to their own wishes as seen in Joshua 24:15, 'and if it is evil in your eyes to serve the Lord, choose this day whom you will serve'. This seems to provide opportunity for gratuitous evil. What a person does is their own responsibility and is not the fault of God. The existence of gratuitous evil, Mitchell asserts, does not negate the sovereignty of God (p. 5). MacGregor supports Little's Creation Order theodicy as a valid explanation for the coexistence of gratuitous evil and the sovereignty of God (2012:119). He contends that sovereignty, as biblically illustrated, consists of divine autonomy and governance. This is in contrast to a highly deterministic view of sovereignty which many theistic greater good theodicies maintain. Agreeing with Little, MacGregor finds that 'because gratuitous evil, or evil lacking any divine purpose, undermines neither divine autonomy nor divine governance, the biblical understanding of sovereignty receives no threat from the existence of such evil' (p. 120).

Plantinga supports an understanding of sovereignty such as Little presents (1974:30). He argues that God can create free creatures, but if he were to make them choose to only do good, then they would not be truly free (p. 30). He finds that humans, being free, sometimes make wrong or evil choices. These choices, however, do not count against God. While Plantinga agrees with Little's definition of sovereignty, he contrariwise maintains that God still brings good out of evil, although we do not always recognise the good obtained. Our failure to recognise the good obtained is because 'our cognitive powers, as opposed to God's, are a bit slim for that' (Plantinga 1996:73).

Geisler and Corduan do not agree with Little's Creation Order theodicy, yet they echo Little's understanding of sovereignty

(1988:384). They argue that for humans to have true freedom in making choices, the choices cannot be 'externally determined' (p. 384). God holds humans responsible for their choices and this can only be done if humans are completely free to make the choices.⁴ God knows what people will choose, but he does not determine the choices for them. This design, to allow people to make free choices, was sovereignly willed by God. By investing people with the ability to make free choices, God's sovereignty was delegated (p. 384). Geisler and Corduan assert that the sovereign God allowed for humans to be sovereign over their choices (p. 384). Geisler sums up the essence of God's sovereignty as he states, 'God is the "author" of everything that happens in the indirect and ultimate sense; he is not the immediate cause of evil actions. He neither promotes them nor produces them; he permits them and controls the course of history so that it accomplishes his ultimate purposes' (2011:24). Saying that God is the 'author' is an important distinction, in that God permits something to happen but he is not the producer of all things. By his sovereignty, his permissive will allows for evil choices to be made, while his perfect will does not promote evil (p. 23). Although embracing the same divine autonomy interpretation of sovereignty as Little, Geisler, and Bocchino do not accept the existence of gratuitous evil, suggesting that God knows a good purpose for every evil which he allows (2001:222). They default to inferring that it is beyond the ability of a human's finite mind to know the good obtained from each evil permitted. While agreeing with Little in part, Geisler and Bocchino support a greater good theodicy, not Little's Creation Order theodicy.

Borofsky argues against Little's Creation Order theodicy as an explanation for the coexistence of gratuitous evil and the sovereignty of God (2011:8). Creation Order theodicy, Borofsky contends, states that God will never go against our choices in order to preserve free will. Real life, however, shows that sometimes God does, in fact, go against our choices. Based on real-life evidence, Borofsky concludes that the Creation Order theodicy makes God 'reactionary to evil and not really sovereign' (p. 8). Gould argues against Little's Creation Order theodicy as an explanation for the coexistence of gratuitous evil and the sovereignty of God on a different basis (2014:461). He argues that if God must allow evil in order to have a meaningful relationship with man, then the evil is still for a greater good, that of enabling relationship. Therefore, the evil is not gratuitous, and Little's theodicy is not a valid explanation for gratuitous evil. Kraay echoes the findings of Gould, thereby finding Little's Creation Order theodicy to be invalid (2018:5).

4 2 Corinthians 5:10, 'For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil.' Romans 14:10, '...For we will all stand before the judgement seat of God.' Romans 14:12, 'So then each of us will give an account of himself to God.'

Blocher contends with Little's idea of sovereignty urging that we forget the notion of divine self-limitation (1994:61). Blocher argues that 'Nowhere does Scripture suggest that God suspends the exercise of his sovereign power in respect of the slightest occurrence in the world' (p. 61). Likewise, Alston finds the existence of gratuitous evil to be irreconcilable to a sovereign God (1996:§2768). Erlandson also posits that to be sovereign, God must be in control of the results of the 'free acts' of men (1991:5). If God does not have complete control, then he is no longer sovereign. Based on their conclusions regarding gratuitous evil and sovereignty, Blocher, Alston, and Erlandson would not find the Creation Order theodicy to be a valid explanation for the concurrence of gratuitous evil and the sovereignty of God.

5 Wykstra 1984. The human obstacle to evidential arguments from suffering; Alston 1991. The inductive argument from evil and the human cognitive condition; Howard-Snyder 1996. The evidential argument from evil.

6 Wykstra defines CORNEA as 'the Condition of Reasonable Epistemic Access', (1984:153).

Wykstra, Alston, and Howard-Snyder⁵ dismiss the Creation Order theodicy as a valid explanation for the coexistence of gratuitous evil and the sovereignty of God on the basis of not believing that any evil can be gratuitous. Wykstra proposes CORNEA,⁶ insisting there is an epistemic difference between God and humans, humans not having reasonable epistemic access to the knowledge of the good being obtained with each evil (1984:152). Alston likewise appeals to the inability of humans to comprehend the good God may obtain via an evil (1991:26). Howard-Snyder follows the same logic, finding that humans are unable at times to discern the purposes of God and thus, humans do not know the good which God will obtain through some evils (1996:§8009).

In spite of the opposition, the evaluation of Little's Creation Order theodicy concludes that it is a reasonable and valid explanation for the coexistence of gratuitous evil and the sovereignty of God. Much of the consternation is centred on the definition of sovereignty. Wellum, in accord with Little, describes such sovereignty as God limiting himself, with the term limitation not referring 'to a weakness of imperfection in God; rather it refers to a self-imposed limitation that is part of his plan, not a violation of it' (2000:78). This view of sovereignty, divine autonomy, is an essential building block to Little's creation order theodicy. Utilizing Little's view of sovereignty, the creation order follows, including the bestowal of libertarian freedom upon humans. Little's theodicy provides for people to make genuinely free choices, which may result in evil (2005:155). Some of the evils may be gratuitous, having a reason, which is the evil choices of humans, but not a divine purpose. The evil does not have a purpose either for the greater good being obtained from it or a worse evil being thwarted by the lesser evil. While God may choose to bring a good in spite of an evil, he is not obligated to bring a good out of any evil, as this would make him

dependent on evil in order to do good. This is in perfect keeping with his sovereignty, as he sovereignly declared the order by which he and humans would interact. This creation order was part of his plan and he sovereignly abides by the order he ordained. Little's understanding of sovereignty is biblically consistent and based on that understanding, does not create any conflict with the sovereignty of God being coexistent with gratuitous evil.

8. Conclusion

The Creation Order theodicy stands in contrast to the greater good theodicies. Having explored the tenets of greater good theodicies, Little's opposition to the greater good theodicies was then surveyed. In response to deficiencies in the greater good theodicies, Little constructed his Creation Order theodicy. His theodicy was delineated and critiqued by considering its essential elements of creation order, libertarian freedom, the best of all possible worlds and middle knowledge. Utilizing the critique of the individual elements allowed for an assessment to be made on the main claim of the Creation Order theodicy; gratuitous evil exists concurrently with the sovereignty of God. Having examined all aspects of Little's theodicy and considering the objections against it, Little's Creation Order theodicy offers a valid explanation for the coexistence of gratuitous evil and the sovereignty of God. Little seems to have effectively answered the objections of his peers, providing a biblically-consistent argument which preserves the doctrine of the sovereignty of God while allowing for the existence of gratuitous evil.

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