



Universiteit
Leiden
The Netherlands

Natural Evil and Eschatology

Brink, G. van den

Citation

Brink, G. van den. (1992). Natural Evil and Eschatology.
In . Kok Pharos Publishing House - Kampen. Retrieved
from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/12117>

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

License: [Leiden University Non-exclusive license](#)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/12117>

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

CHRISTIAN FAITH AND PHILOSOPHICAL THEOLOGY

Essays in Honour of Vincent Brümmer

Presented on the Occasion of
the twenty-fifth Anniversary
of his Professorship in the Philosophy of Religion
in the University of Utrecht

Edited by
Gijsbert van den Brink
Luco J. van den Brom
Marcel Sarot



Pharos

Kok Pharos Publishing House – Kampen – The Netherlands

CIP-GEGEVENS KONINKLIJKE BIBLIOTHEEK, DEN HAAG

Christian

Christian faith and philosophical theology : essays in honour of Vincent Brümmer presented on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of his professorship in the philosophy of religion at the University of Utrecht / eds. Gijsbert van den Brink, Luco J. van den Brom, Marcel Sarot. - Kampen : Kok Pharos

Met bibliogr.

ISBN 90-390-0004-2

Trefw.: godsdienstfilosofie.

© 1992 Kok Pharos Publishing House, Kampen, The Netherlands

Cover by Rob Lucas

ISBN 90 390 0004 2

NUGI 631/619 W-boek

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publisher.

Contents

Preface	vii
1. Four Reasons to Become Nervous and Two Possible Remedies . . . 1 <i>H.J. Adriaanse</i>	
2. Does an Adequate Morality Need a Theistic Context? 22 <i>A. van den Beld</i>	
3. Natural Evil and Eschatology 39 <i>Gijsbert van den Brink</i>	
4. God, Gödel and Trinity 56 <i>Luco J. van den Brom</i>	
5. The Importance of Religious Experience 76 <i>Daniël van Egmond</i>	
6. Views of Life in New Situations: Moral Thinking about Animal Experiments and Biotechnology 92 <i>Robert Heeger</i>	
7. Prayer and Providence 103 <i>Paul Helm</i>	
8. Theism and Christian Worship 116 <i>F.G. Immink</i>	
9. A New View of the World Emerging among Ordinary People . 137 <i>Anders Jeffner</i>	
10. Between Faith and Metaphysics 146 <i>D.Z. Phillips</i>	
11. Evil, Divine Agency and Moral Sensitivity 159 <i>Andy F. Sanders</i>	
12. Omnipotence and Self-limitation 172 <i>Marcel Sarot</i>	
13. Playing God. Some Theological Comments on a Metaphor ... 186 <i>Egbert Schrotten</i>	
14. Exploring the Logic of Perfection: Divine Attributes and Divine Agency 197 <i>Christoph Schwöbel</i>	
15. Studying Religion and Believing Religion 218 <i>Stewart R. Sutherland</i>	

motivational influence of ethical [i.e. altruistic] considerations on fortuitous or escapable inclinations. Their hold on us must be deep..."²¹ Ultimately, however, he too failed to solve the problem. In one of his later publications, moreover, he arrived at the conclusion (as we have already seen) that the motivational force of moral considerations which go beyond self-interest is not sufficiently strong. Moral conversion is indeed necessary. Notice here that this particular metaphor is borrowed from the vocabulary of Christians, whose repertoire of concepts has much more to offer than retrospective, evolutionary sociobiology and the other sciences (including the social sciences) when it comes to alternative perspectives on the human species. There is a God who does not keep himself aloof from humankind. On the contrary, he offers them his love. People can turn away from their wickedness and live: if and when they submit to the love of God. Human motivations can change when they fall under the influence of Divine Grace: for then "costly" moral obligations are not only recognized, but can also be discharged by ordinary human beings. So it could be true both that the "costly" moral obligations of the objectivist blend better with a theistic than with a naturalistic world view; and that theism, unlike naturalism, can give a coherent account of the possibility that such moral demands will be honoured in practice.

Obviously, the fundamental assumption in this argument is that (Christian) theism is actually true, or at least the very essence of theistic belief, viz. that a personal God does exist. Agnostics do not necessarily have to deny the reasonableness of this belief. In that case, the fact that a Christian ethics which is firmly based upon theistic principles is superior to other theories of morality could even be, for them, an argument in favour of the existence of God.

21. Th. Nagel, *The Possibility of Altruism*, Oxford 1970, p.6.

3

Natural Evil and Eschatology

Gijsbert van den Brink (Utrecht)

I

The contemporary Anglo-American philosophical debate on the problem of evil, initiated by J.L. Mackie's seminal article on "Evil and Omnipotence,"¹ seems to have entered a new stage in recent years. Instead of concentrating upon the *logical* problem of so-called *moral* evil, usually in connection with the Free Will Defence as a possible solution, the present discussion seems to have become more and more focused upon the *evidential* and *existential* problems, as well as on *natural* evil, and is therefore now oriented to other possible strategies of defence.²

1. *Mind* 64 (1955), p.200-212.
2. This shift can be attested by references to many recent publications. We mention only the following. On the evidential problem: Alvin Plantinga, "The Probabilistic Argument from Evil," *Philosophical Studies* 35 (1979), p.1-53; on natural evil: Richard Swinburne, "Knowledge from Experience, and the Problem of Evil," in: W.J. Abraham & S.W. Holtzer (eds.), *The Rationality of Religious Belief*, Oxford 1987, p.141-167; on both the evidential problem and natural evil: David McKenzie, "A Kantian Theodicy," *Faith and Philosophy* 1 (1984), p.236-247; on the existential problem of evil: K. Surin, *Theology and the Problem of Evil*, Oxford 1986; M.M. Adams, "Problems of Evil: More Advice to Christian Philosophers," *Faith and Philosophy* 5 (1988), p.121-143; G. van den Brink, "Theodicee en triniteit," *Theologia Reformata* 33 (1990), p.7-27.

In this contribution, I want to take up the question of natural evil. More specifically, I want to discuss one particular type of defence against the charge that God cannot exist, since if He existed He would not have allowed the presence of so much natural evil in our world. Because the type of defence³ in question has become increasingly popular in current literature, and since the objection I intend to raise against it here is to my knowledge peculiarly absent in that literature, this strict limitation does not imply an irrelevance.

My procedure will be as follows. First, taking as a starting point a recent article of Prof. Brümmer on the problem of theodicy, I offer a brief sketch of the theistic explanation of natural evil which is at stake, and which is articulated by Prof. Brümmer in a very eloquent fashion (section II). Second, I render some objections against it (III), my main objection taking the form of an argument from eschatology (IV). Third, I show that in a later article of his on theodicy, Brümmer has become sensitive to the force of this argument, but nevertheless does not address the dilemma in which this puts him with regard to the theistic interpretation of natural evil advocated by him in his earlier article (V). In an attempt to show that Brümmer's views are nevertheless internally coherent, I try myself to address this dilemma, by sketching out what seems to me the most promising way of reconciling Brümmer's theodicy with an adequate account of eschatology (VI). Unfortunately, however, I see myself forced to acknowledge that this attempt fails. Fourth, then, I draw some conclusions (VII).

II

In Michael Peterson's useful survey of recent work on the problem of evil, the rare present-day explanations for natural evil are subsumed under the term "natural law theodicy," since in all of them the concept of natural law plays a crucial role.⁴ The core of this form of theodicy has already been described by

3. Both negatively in the form of a *defence* in a strict sense, as well as in the more positive mode of a *theodicy*. See for the difference between the two concepts most recently Michael Peterson et al., *Reason & Religious Belief*, Oxford 1991, p.100-103. Since the distinction does not bear upon the issue discussed in the present paper, we use both terms interchangeably. A defence as well as a theodicy may consist of several different arguments.

4. M.L. Peterson, "Recent Work on the Problem of Evil," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 20 (1983), p.329-331; cf. on their relative rarity *ibid.*, p.331: "It is a shame that there has not been more work on natural evil and natural law theodicy in the period under review."

F.R. Tennant⁵, but here I recapitulate the main thrust of the somewhat extended version presented by Prof. Brümmer in 1982.⁶ Brümmer unfolds his argument in the context of a discussion of what he calls "passive evil," i.e. all kinds of evil that people and animals have to endure (as opposed to the "active evils" that they bring about themselves, and which can be accounted for in terms of the *free-will defence*). But the category of passive evil is essentially related to that of natural evil, since even the passive evil which people inflict upon one another, although it can of course not be identified with natural evil, is ultimately dependent upon the character of the natural order. It is the structure of our natural order which makes it possible that passive evils are experienced.

Why didn't an omnipotent and omnibenevolent God create the natural order in such a way, that it didn't cause or permit so much passive evil? Why did He refrain from creating a world, in which the experience of passive evil would have been impossible? Intuitively, most of us would be prepared to consider such a world to be a better world than the actual one. Brümmer, however, addresses these questions by pointing out that it is highly difficult to imagine in what sense a world without (the possibility of) passive evil would really be better than the actual world. To support this claim, he first gives the examples of pain and sorrow. In the life of human beings and animals both these feelings function as a kind of necessary psychical mechanism. Pain warns them that something is wrong with their body, whereas sorrow enables them to relieve themselves of certain sad experiences. Moreover, it is one and the same psychical structure which makes possible the experience of both pleasure and pain; and if we lacked the capacity to feel sorrow, it would be equally impossible for us to experience joy. Therefore, it is not so clear that the actual world is worse than a world in which we were unable to experience pain or sorrow.

5. F.R. Tennant, *Philosophical Theology* Vol.2, Cambridge 1968, p.197ff.

6. For the following, see V. Brümmer, "Het kwaad en de goedheid van God," *Nederlands Theologisch Tijdschrift* 36 (1982), p.29-51, especially p.37-40. Prof. Brümmer has recently indicated that by now he is no longer content with the thrust of this article as a whole (cf. his "Kronkels in mijn denkweg," in his: *Wijsgerige theologie in beweging*, Utrecht 1992). That Brümmer still adheres to the theodicy for natural evil as outlined in this article, however, appears from the fact that he offers essentially the same argument in his recent "Zijn theodicee-argumenten overtuigend?," *Wijsgerig Perspectief* 30 (1989/1990), p.67-71. Unfortunately, neither article has been translated into English.

Subsequently, Brümmer gives a stronger and more sophisticated version of this argument, by claiming that a "hedonistic paradise,"⁷ i.e. a world in which no pain and sorrow are possible, is less preferable than the world we live in for at least four reasons. Let us briefly review these reasons.

- (1) A hedonistic paradise is either logically impossible, or has an anthropocentric ecology. As Thomas Aquinas already argued, it would be impossible for, for example, a lion to live without preying on and killing other animals. So a hedonistic paradise for all living beings is logically impossible. A hedonistic paradise for mankind alone, on the other hand, implies an anthropocentric mono-culture. Whether this would be a better world than ours, with its complex ecological balance, is highly questionable.
- (2) A hedonistic paradise presupposes a world without regularity. For clearly, the interests of individuals are varying. What is advantageous for someone in certain circumstances, would be disadvantageous in other circumstances. But a natural order accommodating itself to our contingent needs and wishes is hardly imaginable. This is the point made by Tennant: "If water is to have the various properties in virtue of which it plays its beneficial part ..., it cannot at the same time lack its obnoxious capacity to drown us."⁸ For a natural order lacking any regularity would be more like a chaos than like a cosmos, preventing us from performing many of our normal human rational activities. There would be "no probability to guide us: no prediction, no prudence, no accumulation of ordered experience, no pursuit of premeditated ends, no formation of habit, no possibility of character or of culture,"⁹ nor of science, Brümmer adds. The law-abidingness of nature, including its latent dangers, is a prerequisite for all intellectual and cultural enterprise.
- (3) A hedonistic paradise would more specifically preclude all human development and creativity. Here, Brümmer joins Richard Swinburne's assessment that a half-finished universe like ours is better than a fully finished universe, since the latter would not allow of any growth or improvement. We should prefer a universe like ours, "one in which many things need improving, humanly free agents do not altogether know what is right, and their purposes are often frustrated; but one in which agents can

7. See for this term John Hick, *Philosophy of Religion*, Englewood Cliffs 1963 (4th 1990), p.45.

8. Tennant, *Philosophical Theology* Vol.2, p.201.

9. Ibid., p.199f.

come to know what is right and can overcome the obstacles to achieve their purposes."¹⁰ For only in such a world are human endeavour, ideals, flourishing and creativity possible.

- (4) In a hedonistic paradise morality and responsibility are excluded. The risk of imposing physical and psychical pain upon one another is an essential condition of the world's being the "theatre of moral life." If my morally bad choices would never damage other people or my environment, it would be pointless for me to act in a morally responsible way. Quoting an example of Swinburne: like a man training in a simulator to become a pilot, I could make mistakes, but nobody would suffer from them.

Moreover, numerous so-called second-order goods could not exist, since we would never have an occasion to actualize them. In this connection, Brümmer lists the virtues of courage, perseverance, unselfishness, neighbourly love, helpfulness and sympathy. All of these spiritual goods are conditional upon the existence of certain forms of passive evil. When all human needs are already fulfilled, people cannot act to the benefit of each other.

Drawing the conclusion from these four strains of thought, Brümmer argues that in a hedonistic paradise it would be impossible for us to be *persons* and to live in personal relations with God and with each other. "Evil is the necessary price we have to pay for our personhood."¹¹ Whereas the possibility of moral evil guarantees our freedom, the possibility of natural evil is a necessary condition for our responsibility. Only in a world like ours it is possible for us to live in the freedom and responsibility that are essential for a genuinely personal life - and personal life is no doubt the richest and highest conceivable form of life. Thus, for this reason an omnipotent and omnibenevolent God can be justified in having created and still sustaining a natural order which allows of natural evil, rather than a hedonistic paradise which doesn't.

10. R. Swinburne, "The Problem of Evil," in: S.C. Brown (ed.), *Reason and Religion*, London 1977, p.94f.

11. Brümmer, "Het kwaad," p.40: "Het kwaad is de noodzakelijke prijs, die we moeten betalen voor ons persoon-zijn."

III

As we pointed out above, Brümmer's account of natural evil does not constitute one clear-cut form of theodicy, but rather combines several different motives. More precisely, we can distinguish between three components: a natural law theodicy, emphasizing the inevitability of a regular natural order like ours, including its negative side-effects (1 and 2), a human development argument (3), and an argument from the need for knowledge in combination with an higher-order goods argument (4).¹² Following Brümmer's final summary, let us call the totality of these considerations the personal life defence against the argument for the non-existence of God from natural evil.

Now in my opinion, despite their initial plausibility, the different parts of the personal life defence are vulnerable to various serious counter-arguments. Let us mention one or two of these arguments against each of them. As to the first consideration, it is by no means clear why a natural order in which lions don't eat other animals and in which people under water do not drown should be *logically* impossible.¹³ Surely, given the present bodily constitution of lions and human beings (as well as the chemical composition of water), such things are *physically* impossible. But that is quite another thing. Presumably, our conceptual capacities are too limited to permit justified claims about the logical possibility of other eco-systems than the one we actually live in. Therefore, it is not *a priori* clear why a hedonistic paradise, in which living beings have other physical constitutions such that they do not destroy each other and are not susceptible to being drowned in water etc., should be logically impossible. In other words: the important function of *regularity* in the natural order is beyond doubt. But how do we know that these regularities are *necessarily* as damaging as they are in the actual world?

-
12. See for these latter terms R. Swinburne, "The Free Will Defence," *Archivio di Filosofia* 56 (1988), p.594. The "argument from the need for knowledge" entails that we *need to know* how to bring about good and evil in order to be capable of morally responsible action.
 13. Of course one could stipulate the definition of a lion in such a way, that it belongs to the very essence of a lion to have a digestive tract of such a kind that it can only eat other animals. In that case it would indeed be logically impossible for a lion not to eat other animals. But an essentialism of this kind is certainly not the only live option in definition theory. Moreover, it has been rejected convincingly by Brümmer himself in his *Theology and Philosophical Inquiry*, London 1981, chapter 3.

But let us grant for the sake of argument that a hedonistic paradise for every living being is logically impossible. Then what about the alternative sketched by Brümmer, consisting in the option of a wholly anthropocentric ecology? As it seems to me, Brümmer's own personal life defence is hardly more satisfactory in this respect. For the personal life defence considers all natural evils in the world's history to be justified only for the sake of their enabling *human beings* to lead a personal life. Since it is not clear in which ways we can imagine animals (not to speak of plants) to lead personal lives, the whole of nature is supposed to suffer for the mere pleasure of the *homo sapiens*, who is enabled thereby to lead a rich personal life.

As to the second component of Brümmer's defence, the human development argument is inadequate for at least two reasons. First, it does not *demonstrate* that the presence of passive evil is a necessary precondition for the possibility of human flourishing. A case can be made for the opposite point of view. I do not consider the fact that my knowledge of mathematics is very limited to be a form of passive evil. Nevertheless, I would consider it to be a clear instance of personal development and creativity if, as a result of my mental efforts, my knowledge of mathematics would significantly increase. Even if mathematics would be unnecessary (since we didn't need to build bridges etc.), why shouldn't we consider it to be a good in itself? Second, regardless of the question whether human development is necessarily conditional upon the existence of natural evil, the argument displays a moral insensitivity which cannot coherently be ascribed to a good God. No doubt human creativity and development are highly valuable goods. But it is not at all clear in what sense the personal flourishing of some people could justify the sufferings and afflictions of innumerable groups of other people, who happen to be unable to overcome the obstacles in their lives, but rather perish (physically or mentally) as a result of them. If A's enjoying a professorship is in one way or another (however remotely) parasitic upon B's starving to death, our over-all estimation of A's opportunity for personal growth and creativity ought to be much more unfavourable than is suggested by the human development argument.

Similar comments could be made with regard to the third strand in Brümmer's defence. It is not clear why God would be unable to make us aware of our moral responsibility in other ways than through the experience of so much natural evil. For example, why wasn't it enough that passive evil could only arise from our morally wrong actions instead of from natural events as well? Do we

really need earthquakes and tornadoes in addition to all other existing kinds of passive evils in order to recognize our moral responsibility?¹⁴

And as to the higher-order goods argument, obviously many experiences of passive evil which might form an occasion for the actualization of second-order goods, in fact occasion only more evil. "One cannot feel remorse without having done wrong, but evil may give one an appetite for more ... In a man's own life natural evils such as illness or social evils such as poverty may debase and destroy him."¹⁵ And it seems simply false to claim that "for one person who chooses to respond to the evil by rejecting God, there are a hundred who choose to respond by leading better lives."¹⁶ Moreover, the argument mistakenly interprets regrettable occasions for the exercise of second-order goods as gracefully provided opportunities for such actions. In short, the view that all passive evils can be justified by the second-order goods eventually springing from them reflects a one-sided and unwarranted optimism, as well as a rather perverse account of responsible and virtuous human action.

Briefly, it seems that the personal life defence is deficient in more than one respect.

IV

Instead of pursuing any or each of the indicated lines of criticism now, however, I want to draw attention to another difficulty, which is evoked by the personal life defence as a whole, rather than by one particular strand of it. This is what I call the argument from eschatology. It belongs to the constitutive characteristics of Christian faith to pray for the coming of the Kingdom of God, and to believe that once this prayer will be heard. This implies, that God is expected by the believer to gain the ultimate victory over evil, so that all evils in our world will have to give way, and the present order of things will radically be changed. Praying for the coming of the Kingdom means among other things¹⁷ praying

14. For a somewhat different way of criticizing the "need for knowledge argument," see David O'Connor, "Swinburne on Natural Evil," *Religious Studies* 19 (1983), p.65-73; idem, "Swinburne on Natural Evil from Natural Processes", *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 30 (1991), p.77-88.

15. D.Z. Phillips, "The Problem of Evil," in: Brown, *Reason and Religion*, p.113.

16. W.S. Anglin, *Free Will and the Christian Faith*, Oxford 1990, p.153.

17. See on these V. Brümmer, *What Are We Doing When We Pray?*, London 1984, chapter 4.2.

that as a result of the restored relationship with God a completely new or renewed order of things may be instituted. To indicate the nature of this new dispensation, the Bible uses the image of a new Jerusalem, in which God "will wipe every tear from their eyes, and there shall be an end to death, and to mourning and crying and pain: for the old order has passed away!" (Rev.21,4).

Now clearly, if we take the personal life defence seriously, this Kingdom of God cannot possibly be something to be longed for. According to all of the arguments discussed above, a universe without pain and sorrows would be a worse rather than a better universe in comparison to the present one. No regular ecology would be possible, nor a stable natural order which we could rely upon. The possibilities of personal growth and life-fulfilment, intellectual creativity, cultural development, scientific progress etc. would be excluded. There would be no room for the acquisition of virtues like courage, unselfishness, sympathy etc. In short, all arguments used by Brümmer and others to explain and justify the existence of passive evil in a theistic universe turn out to be at the same time arguments against the desirability of a new Jerusalem. For surely it is perverse to long for an eschaton which exemplifies a *worse* over-all state of affairs in comparison to the present order. And from the perspective of the personal life defence, the Kingdom of God as portrayed in, for example, Rev.21,4 is just that.

In response, we could of course decide to jettison traditional accounts of a future eschaton, as well as any hope for an essentially better world. We could for example simply dismiss the idea of a glorified life after death as a superfluous additional hypothesis, which is detrimental to the project of saving theism, since it unnecessarily complicates things. This is the tack Swinburne seems to take.¹⁸ We could also follow a religiously more viable line and adopt some form of "realized eschatology," in conceiving of the Kingdom of God as already actualized and present among us in the Spirit, i.e. in the restored relationship with God which is experienced in the community of believers. Following this line of thinking, which is suggested by Grace Jantzen,¹⁹ we may hope that more and more people will be attracted to participate in this community's commitment to self-sacrificing love and dedication. But even so, we should be conscious of the fact that it is a fairly high price to pay if we altogether reject the expectation of a structurally different "life of the world to come" (Nicene Creed).

For example, we could not console ourselves and others with the hope that some day diseases, suffering and death, as well as the threat of things like torture

18. Richard Swinburne, *The Existence of God*, Oxford 1979, p.221f.

19. G.M. Jantzen, "Do We Need Immortality?," *Modern Theology* 1 (1984), p.33-44.

and starvation will have ended. Nor can we hope for a situation in which the unjustified sufferings of many people become outweighed (which is, by the way, not the same as compensated or justified) by God's glory. The reason for this is not that such consolation would be fallacious since it lacks any evidential basis, but that it would be entirely ill-conceived. In fact, natural evil cannot be regarded as evil in a strict sense²⁰, since it is wrong to hope for its abrogation. To say that a thing or event is evil amounts to, among other things, claiming that it shouldn't exist or take place. But according to the personal life defence it is a good thing that sickness, suffering, death etc. do exist, since that is the only way for human beings to live as morally responsible persons (to repeat only this argument). Spelled out in this way, the personal life defence turns out to have a strong Leibnizian flavour: the actual world is the best possible one.

Even if we would argue that the personal life defence does not necessarily preclude belief in an eternal life after death, it would be highly difficult to point out what sense we could make of such a belief. For surely eternal life could not be significantly different from our present life. If it were conducted within another physical order, this could only be one which (all things considered) would be worse. At best, the new Jerusalem could be imagined as the perpetual continuation of the actual sublunary world with all its ambiguities and vulnerabilities - but it is of course questionable whether we should long for and believe in *that* sort of after-world. However this may be, "a new heaven and a new earth," i.e. a new universe could never fulfil the authentic Christian hope that "what we suffer at the present time cannot be compared at all with the glory that is going to be revealed to us" (Rom.8,18). On the contrary, both situations would be identical in all their relevant aspects. We should not long for a world in which the preconditions for the experience of evil have disappeared. The old heaven and earth are the best we can conceive of.

I conclude that as a result of these implications of the argument from eschatology, the personal life defence is not only incompatible with the kind of world we could reasonably expect an omnipotent and perfectly good God to

-
20. Cf. A. Vos, "The Problem of Evil: Wrong Question?," in: A. Sanders et al. (eds.), *Belief in God and Intellectual Honesty. Essays in Honor of H.G. Hubbeling*, Assen 1990, p.123-141, especially p.135-137. "Creation is good. There is not only an ontological gulf between Creator and creatures, but there is also a relative independence in virtue of which the physical system acts as the background of moral activity, as the 'ground' of moral being. In this context there would be much to say about pain, disease, accidents and disaster. But my main point is here that talk about 'evil' is misleading" (p.135).

create (as appeared from its other deficiencies pointed out above), but also religiously inadequate, while conflicting with any viable form of eschatology.

V

Thus far, our argument has been rather critical of the work of Prof. Brümmer. Remarkably, however, it is Brümmer himself who stirred up this criticism in a later article of his.²¹ Here, Brümmer puts forward many of the forementioned arguments against the personal life defence, including the argument from eschatology! Instead of aligning himself with Swinburne's theodicy for natural evil, Brümmer now parts company with him in arguing that human freedom and responsibility have no intrinsic value which could justify natural evil.²² Even if we replace these concepts by that of human flourishing, which according to Brümmer does have such an intrinsic value, Swinburne's line of argument continues to be "both misconceived and inadequate"²³ for various reasons, all of which correspond to particular aspects of our own forementioned critique of the personal life defence.

Brümmer's criticism culminates in the accusation of moral insensitivity, but one of the difficulties (according to Brümmer even an "more serious"²⁴ one) he mentions in passing has to do with what we called the argument from eschatology. In this connection, Brümmer defends the possibility of an eschatological situation for which we might long by arguing as follows: "The specific form which human flourishing is to take and the specific sorts of action which are to count as virtuous, depend on the sort of world in which we are living." As to the new Jerusalem, "flourishing in that sort of world cannot take on the same form as in this world,"²⁵ which does not mean that flourishing cannot take on any form at all here. Rather, Brümmer suggests that human flourishing in the new Jerusalem will take place *without* the continual threat of natural evil. This suggestion, however, robs the personal life defence of its most crucial cornerstone. For if human flourishing is also possible in the absence of

-
21. V. Brümmer, "Moral Sensitivity and the Free Will Defence," *Neue Zeitschrift für systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie* 29 (1987), p.86-100.
 22. *Ibid.*, p.88, 90.
 23. *Ibid.*, p.90.
 24. *Ibid.*
 25. Both quotations *ibid.*, p.91.

natural evil, then it is incoherent to argue at the same time that natural evil is a necessary condition for the possibility of human flourishing and personal life.

In short, in 1987 it seemed that Brümmer had become much more sensitive to the force of arguments against the personal life defence. Although he did not discuss the question of natural evil separately in his 1987 article, one was almost forced to assume that Brümmer had yielded his former position with regard to it. This assumption became falsified, however, when in 1989 Brümmer reiterated his personal life defence in virtually the same form as in 1982.²⁶ Since then, we are at a loss as to how Brümmer really conceives of the relation between theodicy and eschatology. Only one explanation seems to be left: Brümmer is inconsistent in the views he takes with regard to this relation in different parts of his work. This is the more remarkable, since in Brümmer's methodological view of the nature of systematic theology the demand of consistency plays a central role.²⁷

VI

Perhaps, however, we are too quick in drawing our conclusions. Perhaps, Brümmer is not at all inconsistent, but only emphasizes different things in different contexts, things which do not necessarily exclude each other when connected up with each other in a proper way. The only way to sort out whether this is the case, is to try to find a way out of the dilemma described above. Before rejecting Brümmer's views on theodicy and eschatology as inconsistent, we should at least do this.

The most promising approach towards a comprehensive and consistent account of the personal life defence in combination with a religiously adequate eschatology seems to me the following one. Besides the possibilities of a future and a realized eschatology, there is the third option of a realizing eschatology. In order to imagine how life could become better than it is without the actual natural order being overthrown, we should explore this notion. Let us suppose that in the course of time people learn from their faults and become morally improved to some degree, so that the total amount of moral evil diminishes. Let us further imagine that in the end, as a result of their moral growth, all people are so convinced of the absurdity of moral evil that they refrain from performing evil

26. V. Brümmer, "Zijn theodicee-argumenten overtuigend?," p.67-71 (cf. above, n.5).

27. See, for example, Vincent Brümmer, "Metaphorical Thinking and Systematic Theology," *Nederlands Theologisch Tijdschrift* 43 (1989), p.213-228.

at all. Passive evil will have been greatly reduced in this situation; only the part of it which has nothing to do with human evil action will continue to exist.

It is possible, however, that people not only gradually mature in morality, but also in prudence, carefulness and intelligence. Here also, they might learn from their mistakes. Thus, they would more and more come to know how to avoid being harmed by natural evil. The culmination of this development might be that our increasing knowledge of bio-chemical brain processes enables us to influence the processes of ageing and dying, so that it becomes possible to banish death. If we extend this line of thought to other forms of natural evil, we can imagine a kind of eschatological situation in which, although the *possibility* of natural evil always remains, the number of *actual occurrences* of natural evil has been reduced to zero. In short, to paraphrase the words of the Dutch poet Camphuysen: If all men were wise, and also did well, earth would be a paradise, rather than a hell.

The most pertinent criticism of this scenario is of course that there is little empirical evidence in support of it. The pervasive reality of sin and the persistent power of evil are blatantly underestimated in it. Another version of basically the same approach which is both empirically and theologically more satisfying in this respect, however, is to be found in John Hick's soul-making theodicy. Here, it is God who purposely creates human beings within a natural order which contains a genuine risk of evil, of failure and suffering. The reason for this is that our natural order is the only "kind of world that God might make as an environment in which moral beings may be fashioned, through their own free insights and responses, into 'children of God'."²⁸ In other words: it was logically impossible for God to create human beings at once as spiritually and morally mature persons, since spiritual and moral maturity can only be acquired through a process of cumulative *experience*, in which the threats and the temptations of evil are gradually overcome.

The assumption of such an on-going soul-making process seems to remove our embarrassment with regard to Brümmer's view on the relation between theodicy and eschatology, and to solve the suspected dilemma between both.²⁹

28. John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*, London ²1977, p.257. Although H. Berkhof, *Christelijk geloof*, Nijkerk ⁶1990, nowhere quotes Hick's book approvingly, there are important similarities in Hick's and Berkhof's theological views on evil, as is especially clear in their respective doctrines of creation and eschatologies.

29. Significantly, in his 1987 article Brümmer explicitly refers to Hick's soul-making theodicy as entailing a conceivable account of eschatology ("Moral Sensitivity," p.91).

On the one hand, the presence of natural evil is a logically necessary condition for the making of real persons. Since it is generally acknowledged that omnipotence does not entail the ability to do the logically impossible, even an omnipotent God cannot by-pass the process of spiritual and moral growth, which necessarily takes place in the interaction with real challenges. On the other hand, this does not mean that a world containing natural evil is by definition a better world than a world without natural evil. Nor does it entail that it is unreasonable to long for the eschatological perfection and transformation of our earthly existence. On the contrary, it is precisely the doctrine of eschatological consummation which "provides the capstone for theodicy."³⁰ Only when the spiritual and moral perfection of human beings will really be attained in the eschaton, the existence of natural evil in our present world might be justified. In this way, far from being its rival, eschatology functions as theodicy's necessary complement.

Moreover, the soul-making theodicy cannot be as easily criticized for its lack of empirical support as its more secular counterpart. For supposing that God does not want to manipulate human beings in order to further their spiritual and moral development, it may take an immense amount of time, far more than only our earthly existence, before God's steadfast love will win the victory over evil and our human "long and slow pilgrim's progress towards the Celestial City"³¹ will be completed. The Christian belief in an eternal life beyond death is of crucial importance here.

In short, to interpret the relation between theodicy and eschatology in terms of Hick's soul-making (or, we might say, person-making) theodicy seems to be a constructive and successful proposal for making Brümmer's views on this relation consistent and comprehensively coherent. Nevertheless, the flaw of this proposal is not hard to find. For it does not deal seriously with the question of what happens with the natural order in the eschatological situation. There are two mutually exclusive possibilities here, which together reformulate our dilemma in its full force.

1. Either the eschaton will show a natural order that is free from all the ambiguities which now threaten us so persistently. In this case, there is neither the risk of harming others or the environment, nor the risk of being harmed by others or by the environment. But then we will not in any way live a truly

30. G. Stanley Kane, "Soul-making Theodicy and Eschatology," *Sophia* 14 (1975), p.27. Cf. Hick, *Evil*, p.384.

31. Hick, *Evil*, p.386.

personal life, in spiritual maturity and moral responsibility. It will even be unclear why we had, in such a slow and painful process, to learn to live as such mature persons at all.

2. Or the eschaton will display a natural order which is equally beset with the risks of natural evil and suffering as ours. Perhaps the actual occurrences of evil and suffering will greatly have been reduced, as a result of our perfected prudential and moral capacities. But nonetheless animals will continue to devour each other and plants. Or, if there is no animal and vegetable life, we are back to the anthropocentric mono-culture, the rejection of which was part of the personal life defence. Moreover, however intelligent and careful we may have become, it will statistically remain unpreventable that people sometimes drown in water, are burnt by fire, killed by unpredictable calamities etc.³²

It will not help us to construct mediate forms between these two extremes, for example by denying the eschatological existence of water, fire and earthquakes. For to the extent that such mediate forms make the natural order less unpredictable, they make human life less personal; and to the extent that they make human life more fully personal, they make the natural order more dangerous. Here we meet again with the mechanism which forms the very core of the personal life defence. The more possibilities for evil disappear, the less we are able to live and flourish as persons - or so the defence goes. Neither will it help us to retreat to an appeal to ignorance or mystery at this point, as both Hick and Brümmer seem to do.³³ For if argumentation and reasoned speculation is permitted in the context of eschatology at all, than it is rather arbitrary to forbid it precisely at this point. That would be too cheap a solution. In short, the most promising way we could conceive of to reconcile the personal life theodicy with an adequate account of eschatology fails.

-
32. Cf. Anglin, *Free Will*, p.150: "Even if we always acted wisely and well, there would still be a great number of natural evils."
33. John Hick responds to the objection that there is a fatal contradiction in his use of eschatology to complete theodicy as follows: "This again is an exceedingly difficult question to meet; nevertheless, I believe that its logical effect is rather to remind us of our ignorance concerning the life of heaven..." (*Evil*, p.351). Brümmer, as we saw above, simply assumes that human flourishing will take on forms which do not presuppose the existence of suffering and evil, without specifying how this might be the case ("Moral Sensitivity," p.91).

We conclude with a fourfold remark.

First, the conceptual price-ticket of the adoption of the natural law theodicy (and of the personal life defence as its most convincing elaboration) is the abandonment of traditional eschatology, and vice versa. This dilemma attests to the generally acknowledged need of a convincing and comprehensive theology of nature.³⁴

Second, faced with this dilemma there are two considerations which can help us in choosing here. First of all, alternative lines of dealing theologically with the problem of natural evil are available in the theistic tradition. For example, in Judeo-Christian thought from Genesis 3 onwards natural evil has been considered as the consequence of human sin and God's wrath over it. Perhaps we should not reject the doctrine of original sin as easily as modern theology usually does.³⁵ But if we fear that the adoption of this traditional answer will only lead us into more difficulties, then there are other alternatives which may be examined.³⁶ In the second place, it is possible to live in faith without having a clear-cut theodicy which answers all questions. In a certain sense, this is precisely what living by faith amounts to: "Believing where we cannot prove" (Tennyson). But it is far less meaningful to live in faith without any eschatological hope, i.e. to believe in a God who will not ultimately succeed in saving and liberating his people and his creation.

Third, it belongs to the ontological presuppositions (the "hard core") of the biblical metaphors which portray the eschatological situation, that such a salvation requires the overthrow of the present natural order. This is most clear from the peaceful way in which animals live with each other according to these pictures. Isaiah 11,6-9, for example, even if we take into account the metaphorical nature of these verses, suggests a regular natural order without the possibility of natural evil. There is one event which gives us hope that such a wonderful overthrow might really take place: the Resurrection of Jesus, breaking the natural order of death.

Fourth, we cannot escape the conclusion that Prof. Brümmer is inconsistent in some of his views on the relation between theodicy and eschatology. Perhaps,

34. See in this connection - to give only one recent example - Theo de Boer, *De God van de filosofen en de God van Pascal*, Delft 1989, 37-42, 88-95.

35. For a useful recent defence of it, see Anglin, *Free Will*, p.149-151.

36. Anglin, *Free Will*, p.144-154 discusses five different accounts of natural evil.

however, this is not as worrying as Brümmer himself will think. For it is precisely the (real or apparent) inconsistencies in the work of the master which offer the pupil, standing on his shoulders, the opportunity to try to make some further advance.³⁷ Meanwhile, all our advances will perhaps turn out to signify nothing in the light of the age which is to come, and which will no doubt be *totaliter aliter* than we can now think of in our boldest imaginings. In that sense, praying for the Kingdom to come and acting correspondingly is certainly of more importance than speculating about its precise nature.

37. See for an example V. Brümmer, "The Dilemma of a Christian Philosophy," in: R. Kroner, A.E. Loen et al., *Philosophy and Christianity. Philosophical Essays Dedicated to Professor Dr. Herman Dooyeweerd*, Kampen 1965, p.166-177.