

RESEARCH ARTICLE

# The Contribution of Eric Mascall to Theodicy and (Possibly) Providence

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## Abstract

This article explores Eric Mascall's contribution to theodicy and (possibly) providence. It offers a taxonomy of Christian responses to the problem of evil: those which see suffering as instrumental to the purposes of God, those which see suffering as inevitable within the purposes of God, and those which see suffering as inimical to the purposes of God. It offers a critique of all three families of such responses. It then locates Mascall's theodicy on that 'map'. It argues that Mascall's proposal, if accepted, removes the main argument against the inimical family of responses, which it sees as fitting best with the healing ministry of Jesus, as being most unambiguously committed to the goodness of God, and as being the most pastorally sensitive of the three categories. It also raises, without advocating, the possibility that all divine action may be indirect, thus safeguarding the non-coerciveness of God without compromising eschatological hope.

**Keywords:** Angels; fall; interconnectedness; non-coercive; providence; suffering; theodicy

## A Proposed Taxonomy of Theodicies

I have elsewhere<sup>1</sup> offered a three-fold taxonomy of responses to the problem of evil in Christian theology. The first category of such responses comprises those which see suffering as *instrumental* to the purposes of God. Those who argue for this

<sup>1</sup>'The Fallenness of Nature: Three Non-human Suspects', in Stanley P. Rosenberg (et al. eds), *Finding Ourselves after Darwin: Conversations on the Image of God, Original Sin, and the Problem of Evil*, (Grand Rapids MI: Baker Academic, 2018), pp. 244–61. This taxonomy is described as 'helpful' by Seth Hart in his article, 'An Evolving Theodicy: A Critical and Constructive Engagement with Bethany Sollereder's *God, Evolution, and Animal Suffering*, in *Theology and Science*, 21.3 (2023), pp. 491–503. He criticizes my treatment of this taxonomy, however, for assuming 'an exclusivity to these categories', and argues that 'A non-reductionistic account will incorporate all three approaches in a single, integrated narrative'. Clearly, they can be so incorporated – the questions that need then to be faced are a) whether they are *coherently* combined, given the different moral impulses behind the first and the third, and the different metaphysical assumption behind the second, and b) whether, in being so incorporated, they find ways of avoiding the criticisms to which each category is vulnerable, or whether they become vulnerable to the criticisms directed at all three!



position advance a number of different suggestions as to what the purposes are which are served by suffering, and which thus justify God's allowance of suffering within his creation. Some see the purpose as being primarily *reformatory*:

Natural evil – the pain of disease, the intermittent and unpredictable destruction of natural disasters, the decay of old age, the imminence of death – takes away a person's satisfaction with himself. It tends to humble him, show him his frailty, make him reflect on the transience of temporal goods, and turn his affections towards other worldly things, away from the things of this world.<sup>2</sup>

In this way, it acts as a God's 'megaphone to rouse a deaf world'.<sup>3</sup> Some see the purpose as being *virtue-creating*: without suffering, there could be no *compassion*; without threat, there could be no courage; and human nature is the better for having these qualities: 'It needs those insidious processes of decay and dissolution which these money and strength cannot ward off for long to give us the opportunities, so easy otherwise to avoid, to become heroes'.<sup>4</sup> Some see the purpose as being primarily *aesthetic*: just as a painting needs dark colours as well as light to have any interest as a painting, and just as a piece of music requires discord as well as harmony to have any interest as a piece of music, so creation is richer for containing pain as well as pleasure: 'the colour black in a picture may very well be beautiful if you take the picture as a whole', for 'though the parts may be imperfect the whole is perfect'.<sup>5</sup> These all belong to the instrumental category of theodicies, because, in each variant, God uses suffering as the instrument with which to achieve his purposes, be they reformatory, virtue-creating or aesthetic.

The second category of responses to the problem of evil in Christian theology comprises those who see suffering as *inevitable* within the purposes of God. They argue that any world that is in any way similar to our world, containing its values and qualities, is simply impossible without also containing its disvalues. So intertwined, so causatively enmeshed, are the values and disvalues that it is not possible for them to be disentangled in such a way that the values are instantiated without the disvalues:

Poor limping world, why does not your kind Creator pull the thorn out from your paw? But what sort of a thorn is this? And if it were pulled out, how much of the paw would remain? How much, indeed, of the Creation? What would a physical universe be like, from which all mutual interference of systems was eliminated? It would be no physical universe at all. It would not be like an animal relieved of pain by the extraction of a thorn. It would be like an animal rendered incapable of pain by the removal of its nervous system; that is to say,

<sup>2</sup>E. Stump, 'The Problem of Evil', *Faith and Philosophy* 2.4 (1985), pp. 392–424 (409).

<sup>3</sup>C.S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (London: Collins, Fontana Books, 1940, Eleventh Impression, [April 1972]), p. 81.

<sup>4</sup>Richard G. Swinburne, 'Knowledge from Experience, and the Problem of Evil', in W.J. Abraham and S.W. Holtzer (eds.) *The Rationality of Religious Belief* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), pp. 141–167 (145–6).

<sup>5</sup>Augustine, *De Vera Religione*, 40.76, cited and discussed in Hohyun Sohn, 'The Beauty of Hell? Augustine's Aesthetic Theodicy and its Critics', *Theology Today*, 64.1, (April 2007), pp. 47–57 (49).

of its animality. So the physical universe could be delivered from the mutual interference of its constituent systems only by being deprived of its physicality.<sup>6</sup>

To the objection that this compromises the omnipotence of God, making him incapable of producing a physical world that is free from suffering, those who see suffering as inevitable within the purposes of God might respond with reference to the widely accepted proposition that that God's inability to do what is not logically possible is no adverse reflection of his omnipotence. God's inability to create a physical world that is free from suffering falls under this permitted exception clause in the sense that there is no possible world which is both physical and free from what Farrer calls 'the mutual interference of systems'.<sup>7</sup>

The third category of response to the problem of evil within Christian theology, in this proposed theodical taxonomy, comprises those who see suffering as *inimical* to the purposes of God. Far from seeing suffering as deliberately and purposefully permitted within the Economy of God, these theodicians see suffering as what happens when the precepts of God are defied, and his plans and purposes thwarted. Far from being something purposefully built in to God's world, it is something that is to be – and will be – rooted out. Far from being 'proper' to human experience, suffering is, 'in both the scholastic and the popular sense of the term', 'accidental'.<sup>8</sup> If suffering has no positive place in the purposes of God, then it can only have its origin in creaturely choice. This category of response to the problem of evil therefore requires a doctrine of the fall. It requires an account of the origin of evil that is rooted in creaturely rather than divine will, and that is therefore narrational and historical – in the sense that, being creaturely, it must be temporal rather than eternal. It must have taken place in created time. Those who belong to this theodical category would see one of the advantages of their position that, since evil was not the first word about our world, it need not be the last.<sup>9</sup> Because suffering is not built in, it may be rooted out. Because suffering is contrary to the divine purpose, we are unambiguously mandated to eradicate or ameliorate it, whenever and wherever we come across it, to the extent that we can. (The very presence of suffering constitutes a moral demand upon us, as the parable of the good Samaritan illustrates.) Because suffering is inimical to the purposes of the omnipotent God, hope for the future, as well as a proactive moral opposition to suffering in the present, is unambiguously grounded.

### Criticism of the Theodical Categories

These three clusters of theodical approach are, of course, vulnerable to extensive and varied criticism. The view that suffering is instrumental to the purposes of God is open to the criticism that it grounds suffering too positively within the purposes of God and pays it too much respect; that it jars with our innate sense of the wrongness

<sup>6</sup>Austin Farrer, *Love Almighty and Ills Unlimited* (London: Collins, Fontana Books, 1966), p. 51.

<sup>7</sup>*Love Almighty and Ills Unlimited*, p. 51.

<sup>8</sup>E.L. Mascall, *The Importance of Being Human: Some Aspects of the Christian Doctrine of Man*, Oxford University Press, London, 1959, p. 76.

<sup>9</sup>This is adapted from Derek Kidner's comment on Eccl. 7:29, in *The Message of Ecclesiastes* (Leicester: IVP, 1976), p. 73.

and should-not-be-ness of serious suffering; that it sees too positively what we experience so negatively; that, in giving suffering such a positive place in the purposes of God, and in making him the ultimate inflictor of our suffering, it distances us from the One who is Saviour and fellow sufferer, not inflictor; that in positing God as the (albeit beneficent) cause of our suffering, it makes us experience him as enemy. Within Christian theology in particular, it is vulnerable to the objection that it sits uneasily with the healing ministry of Christ. If we see the healing ministry of Christ as the divine assault on suffering, if we take seriously the fact that in every one of the forty or so occasions in the gospels when Jesus is seen in the same frame as human suffering, he is presented as confronting, opposing and ending it,<sup>10</sup> then it is hard to reconcile that with a view of suffering that highlights the good consequences of such suffering within the purposes of God. On no occasion is Jesus ever recorded as having declined to heal someone who asked him for healing, on the grounds that the suffering was proving beneficial to the sufferer. He does not seem concerned to educate the sufferer into a truer and fuller understanding of their suffering, but to heal the sufferer. The healing ministry of Jesus would seem to sit more comfortably with the view of suffering as inimical to the purposes of God. If our guide to the character and purposes of God is the incarnate human person, Jesus of Nazareth, then his attitude towards suffering would appear to be one of hostility. His weeping at the graveside of Lazarus<sup>11</sup> would seem to reflect a sadness and anger at the tragic and wrongful intrusion of death into the creation of the Author of Life.

The view that suffering is inevitable within the purposes of God is open to criticism for relying too heavily on a Platonic world-view. It could be said to sail too close to the Platonic wind by implying that there is something irreformably deficient about matter that it is unmalleable in the hands, and to the loving and harmonious purposes, of God. How does this view, that no physical world with the values of our world could logically be free from the disvalues which we experience and from which we (and other creatures) suffer, sit alongside the biblical hope of a world in which death, mourning, crying and pain are no more?<sup>12</sup> What sort of an eschatology is open to proponents of this view other than a Platonic eschatology in which the whole physicality of the creation project – so central to creation, incarnation, vocation, resurrection, ascension and sacraments – is left behind?<sup>13</sup> Or, to reverse

<sup>10</sup>Or, at least, endeavouring to do so. See Mt. 13:58.

<sup>11</sup>Jn 11. Mascall does muse (in *Christ and the Cosmos*, 1966) that God *might* have the resources to bring about a state in which suffering is seen not to matter. I suggest that this is to place too much emphasis on the 'eternal weight of glory' (2 Corinthians 4:17) outweighing our experience of suffering, at the expense of the irrevocability of the compassion of Christ. Our experience of suffering may ultimately be *outweighed* by the eternal weight of glory, but that does not render our suffering negligible (rather as we may be worth more than many sparrows, but that is only an encouragement if sparrows are worth a lot). The highest eschatology does not undo the should-not-have-been-ness of suffering.

<sup>12</sup>Rev. 21:4.

<sup>13</sup>For a critique of Platonic eschatology, see Tom Wright, *The Day the Revolution Began: Rethinking the Meaning of Jesus' Crucifixion* (London: SPCK, 2017), and *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection and the Mission of the Church* (London: SPCK, 2007). It should be pointed out that not all proponents of the inevitable view of suffering do hold to a Platonic eschatology. Christopher Southgate's eschatology does not seem to differ significantly from mine. (See our contributions to *God, Struggle and Suffering in the Evolution of Life*, Bloomsbury, forthcoming.) My point is simply that there seems to be a

engineer from the biblical vision of a new heavens and new earth no longer marred by death, mourning, crying or pain, and from the eating and touchable resurrected body of Jesus,<sup>14</sup> is a physical world free from ‘the mutual interference of the systems’ as impossible as this view suggests? Is there a danger here of projecting from the limited and limiting perspective of those who have only experienced a fallen world and therefore cannot imagine one that is gloriously different from the current state of a world that is far from the creational purposes – and redemptive determination – of God?

The view that suffering is inimical to the purposes of God is open to the criticism that a doctrine of the fall capable of accounting for all suffering has not been sustainable since Darwin. *Moral* evil occurring within the creation of a good and omnipotent God is explicable with reference to the free will of human beings,<sup>15</sup> but *natural* evil – and, in particular, natural evil that occurred prior to the evolution of morally accountable human beings – is not. Since Darwin, we have known that there has been conflict, suffering, violence, death, disease, predation, frustration and extinction long before the emergence of human beings, and it is therefore no longer possible to attribute all suffering to the intentional and culpable departure of human beings from the precepts and purposes of God.<sup>16</sup> To quote E.L. Mascall, ‘it was until recent years almost universally held that all the evils, both moral and physical, which afflict this earth are in some way or another derived from the first act by which a bodily creature endowed with reason deliberately set itself against what it knew to be the will of God . . .’<sup>17</sup> This explanation is no longer available to us.

### Autobiographical Note

It was this awareness of the impossibility, since Darwin, of explaining all suffering with reference to the human fall that motivated my doctoral research and began my life-long theological quest.

It was my accidental discovery of E.L. Mascall’s *Christian Theology and Natural Science: some Questions on their Relations*, the published version of his Bampton lectures of 1956, which, to my mind at least, gave me a way forward from the impasse in which my thinking was stuck. Being theologically and pastorally averse to the family of responses to the problem of evil that see suffering as instrumental to the purposes of God, and being exegetically and missionally averse to (what I saw and still see as) the Platonic implications of the family of responses that see suffering as inevitable within the purposes of God left me with nowhere to go if Darwin had

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tension between belief in the inevitability of the destructive mutual interference of systems and belief in a healed physical world in which the wolf lies down with the lamb.

<sup>14</sup>Lk. 24:39, 43.

<sup>15</sup>The Free Will hypothesis is itself, of course, open to a number of criticisms. I have addressed some of these in Michael Lloyd, ‘The Cosmic Fall and the Free Will Defence’, Thesis (DPhil), University of Oxford, 1997, available in the Bodleian Library.

<sup>16</sup>See William Dembski, *The End of Christianity: Finding a good God in an Evil World* (Bletchley, Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2009) for an attempt to attribute pre-human suffering to human sin. And see my critique of this attempt in Rosenberg, *Finding Ourselves after Darwin*, pp. 258–261.

<sup>17</sup>E.L. Mascall, *Christian Theology and Natural Science: Some Questions on their Relations* (New York: The Ronald Knox Company, 1956), p. 32.

blocked off the possibility of seeing suffering as inimical to the purposes of God. Mascall's suggestion of how the Judaeo-Christian tradition provides resources which enable one to hold to the inimicality of suffering within the purposes of God, notwithstanding the pre-human occurrence of suffering, was therefore a light-bulb – and a break-through – moment for me. It offered the prospect of an intellectually coherent and a pastorally sensitive way through the theodical minefield.<sup>18</sup> And the fact that Mascall only devoted a couple of pages to this suggestion still left me with a thesis to write!<sup>19</sup>

### Mascall's Contribution

Mascall acknowledges the reality of the problem of pre-human suffering – a problem unveiled to us by Darwinian evolutionary theory: 'Knowing what we now do about the past history of the earth, it seems difficult to suppose that nothing that happened upon it in any way contravened the will of God until the commission of the first human sin'.<sup>20</sup> He allows that we should not project (from our own experience as possessors of both 'an elaborate nervous system' and 'a highly developed frontal cerebral cortex', capable of imagination) a co-extensive experience of suffering onto animals, which may not be able to anticipate the prolongation or recurrence of such suffering in the future. We need, he says, 'to beware of assuming that wild animals experience pain or frustration in anything like the way we do; their cerebral structure does not seem to make that possible'.<sup>21</sup> Nevertheless, he writes that . . .

. . . it is difficult to feel, when we consider the course that evolution has taken on this earth, that, even before man appeared, everything was going precisely as God ideally intended it to go. It is therefore interesting to recall that the Church has held from the beginning that, before the creation of man, sin had already occurred in the angelic realm, and that a firmly based tradition ascribes to the angels, among other occupations, that of tending the material world. If there is any truth in such ideas, if the world in God's intention was to be one in which the realms of matter and of spirit were to be linked together in intimate union (as they are, in microcosm, most conspicuously in each individual human being), and if the lower level of this cosmos were to be under the surveillance and loving care of the higher, it seems reasonable to suppose that defection and rebellion in the angelic realm will drastically disorder the material world, and

<sup>18</sup>I wrote to Mascall in 1988, to ask him to elucidate and expand on his published position. He responded: 'Please forgive a brief reply to your very interesting letter. I have had to retire into a nursing home, and writing is difficult. You have obviously read all the relevant matter, and there is nothing that I can add. It's really all in *The Screwtape Letters!*'

<sup>19</sup>One of the contributors to this issue happened to be the examiner for my End of First Year Review. Professor Rowan Williams questioned whether there was enough material in Mascall's work to resource a whole doctoral thesis. He readily agreed that Mascall is a major figure – 'but not in this field'. This of course is true. It is perhaps a tribute to the richness and creativity of Mascall's theological thinking that he was able to make a significant contribution even in an area to which he gave little (published) attention.

<sup>20</sup>Mascall, *Christian Theology and Natural Science*, p. 35.

<sup>21</sup>*The Importance of Being Human*, p. 80, referring to the work of C.E. Raven.

that, while its development in accordance with God's purpose will not be entirely frustrated, it will be grievously hampered and distorted.<sup>22</sup>

This, if<sup>23</sup> accepted, seemed – and seems – to me to make possible a doctrine of the fall, the chronology of which is capable of accounting for pre-human suffering as well as for humanly caused suffering, because it posits creaturely agency as being responsible for pre-human suffering, rather than either divine intent or constraint upon divine capability. This seemed – and seems – to me to extend helpfully the free will hypothesis to cover not just human free will, but other free creaturely agency that pre-dated the evolution of human beings, in a way that renders it capable of accounting for pre-human suffering. The extent to which we find Mascall's suggestion compelling will depend to a significant extent upon the credence we give to the two major claims he makes: first, that the Church has from the beginning believed in the pre-human fall of the angels; and secondly, that 'the world in God's intention was to be one in which the realms of matter and of spirit were to be linked together in intimate union'. We shall look at each of these claims now.

### The Pre-Human Fall of the Angels<sup>24</sup>

Mascall's attribution of pre-human suffering and violent inter-species conflict to the disruption of the development of creation caused by the angelic fall clearly depends upon the dating of that cosmic fall. His position requires a pre-human date, and he claims that that has been the belief of the Church 'from the beginning'. Is that claim well-grounded? There were initially two different traditions regarding the cause of the angelic fall: pride and envy.<sup>25</sup> Where pride is the cause, the fall tends to be dated early enough for Mascall's purposes. For instance, 2 Enoch sees Satanail<sup>26</sup> as grasping for equality with God: 'But one from the order of the archangels deviated, together with the division that was under his authority. He thought up the impossible idea, that he might place his throne higher than the clouds which are above the earth, and that he might become equal to my power.'<sup>27</sup> That is dated to the second day of creation – long before the creation of humankind.

<sup>22</sup>Mascall, *Christian Theology and Natural Science*, p. 36, cf. *Christ, the Christian and the Church: A Study of the Incarnation and its Consequences*, Longmans, Green and Co., London, 1946, pp. 154–157.

<sup>23</sup>Clearly, this is a big 'if'! I do not intend to mount an apologetic for Mascall's hypothesis here, partly because this article is an exposition of his theological contribution and he does not himself mount such an apologetic, and partly because what he does do is to offer a hypothesis. A hypothesis can be considered successful to the extent in which it a) fits the facts (in this case both biblical and scientific facts), b) is self-consistent, and c) sheds light on the human condition beyond its own immediate explanatory aims.

<sup>24</sup>This section and the following section draw heavily on (and quote from) Michael Lloyd, 'The Cosmic Fall and the Free Will Defence'.

<sup>25</sup>Mascall sides unambiguously with the former: 'the radical sin of the fallen angels is pride, and any other sins, such as disobedience, of which they are guilty, follow upon it and are included in it'. (*The Importance of Being Human*), p. 78.

<sup>26</sup>The name 'Satanail' is present only in the 'P' text's secondary chapter headings, though the account of the fall of 'one from the order of archangels' is there in the longer recension. See Forsyth, *The Old Enemy: Satan & The Combat Myth* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1987), pp. 242–247.

<sup>27</sup>2 Enoch 29.4–5.

Where envy is the cause, the fall of the angels tends to be dated within human history – and therefore too late to be considered as the hypothetical explanation for pre-human suffering. The Life of Adam and Eve, for example, sees the trigger for Satan's revolt as his refusal to worship the newly-created Adam: 'I do not worship Adam. . . . I will not worship one inferior and subsequent to me. I am prior to him in creation; before he was made, I was already made.'<sup>28</sup> He ought to worship me. . . . If He be wrathful with me, I will set up my throne above the stars of heaven and will be like the Most High'.<sup>29</sup> The idea that it was being summoned to worship Adam that prompted Satan to rebel and thus brought about his expulsion from heaven is also to be found in 'The *Treasure Cave*, the Koran, the *Acts of Philip*, the *Apocalypse of Sedrach*, and, in modified form, in the *History of the Creation and of the Transgression of Adam*'.<sup>30</sup>

The envy tradition was followed<sup>31</sup> by the Gospel of Bartholomew,<sup>32</sup> by Justin Martyr, who likewise saw Satan as having fallen by leading Eve astray, and Tatian who saw the falls of Satan and humanity as being synchronous. Satan persuaded Adam and Eve to regard him as a god, whereupon Adam and Eve became mortal and Satan became a demon.<sup>33</sup>

So, in the first three centuries of the Church, there were two ways in which the fall of the angels was understood and narrated: one saw the cause as pride and posited a pre-human date for that event, the other saw the cause as envy and posited a date that overlapped with human history.<sup>34</sup> Bamberger suggests that the former was the majority position: 'The majority of Christian thinkers, however, adopted the notion we first encountered in II Enoch – that at the very beginning Satan rebelled out of sheer pride; and he attacked mankind, who were created after his downfall, out of malice and vengefulness'.<sup>35</sup> One of the motivations that led the majority to opt for a pre-human angelic fall may have been the exegetical consideration of the serpent in

<sup>28</sup>Note how even this tradition sees the angelic beings as chronologically prior to human beings.

<sup>29</sup>The Life of Adam and Eve 15. Note how even the 'envy' tradition sees pride playing a subsequent role.

<sup>30</sup>F.R. Tennant, *The Sources of the Doctrines of the Fall and Original Sin* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1903), p. 246.

<sup>31</sup>If Bamberger's dating of these works is correct.

<sup>32</sup>See 4:24, 55.

<sup>33</sup>This is intriguingly similar to the suggestion of N.T. Wright as to how the principalities and powers became a hostile and oppressive force: 'When we humans commit idolatry, worshipping that which is not God as if it were, we thereby give to other creatures and beings in the cosmos a power, a prestige, an authority over us which *we*, under God, were supposed to have over *them*. When you worship an idol, whatever it is, you abdicate something of your own proper human authority over the world, and give it to that thing, whatever it is, calling into being a negative force, an anti-God force, a force which is opposed to creation . . .' N.T. Wright, *Evil and the Justice of God* (London: SPCK, 2006), pp. 71–72. I have suggested elsewhere – in *One God, One People, One Future: Essays in Honour of N.T. Wright*, SPCK, London, 2018, p. 71 – that he has been moving away from this view towards a more traditional account of 'the rebellious non-human powers . . . luring humans into idolatry, rather than being themselves the by-product of that idolatry'.

<sup>34</sup>There is a slight exception to this. A minority version of the envy tradition saw the trigger for Satan's revolt as being the command of God not to worship Adam, but to make obeisance to the pre-incarnate Christ. See Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory*, Vol. 3: *Dramatis Personae: Persons in Christ* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press), pp. 490–1, for references. Clearly, this could embrace a pre-human dating for the event.

<sup>35</sup>Bernard J. Bamberger, *Fallen Angels: The soldiers of Satan's realm* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1952), p. 82.



the Genesis 3 narrative. It was by now common practice to identify the serpent with Satan<sup>36</sup> and the serpent seems to be working directly against the command of God, even prior to the human act of disobedience. However that may be, by the time of Augustine the position is quite clear: the pre-human dating of the Satanic revolt has become standard. The plot against Adam has become the effect and not the cause of Satan's expulsion from heaven. Satan's pride is seen to be prior to his envy.

Therefore, Mascall's claim that 'the Church has held from the beginning that, before the creation of man, sin had already occurred in the angelic realm'<sup>37</sup> is not wholly accurate – it has been believed within the Church from the beginning, alongside a tradition that dated the first occurrence of angelic sin during the course of, rather than prior to, human history – but it is accurate enough for the purposes of his hypothesis. The pre-human dating of the fall of the angels was believed within the Jewish literature of the intertestamental period, and within the early Church – and it became the dominant position after (and with the authority of) Augustine.

The early adoption within the Church of a pre-human date for the angelic fall is not actually necessary for Mascall's position, but he does see it as significantly supportive of that position:

This suggestion is the more compelling because the doctrine of an angelic fall was certainly not postulated in order to account for the existence of evil in the material world before man. It was in fact generally believed that all evil in the material world was the direct consequence of human sin, even if one of the consequences of that sin was that the world had largely fallen under the domination of the fallen angelic powers. It is therefore striking that the twin beliefs that the angels had charge over the material world and that many of them had fallen away from God before the commission of the first human sin were, so to speak, stored away in readiness for answering a problem as yet unthought of, namely that of a possible distortion and deviation in pre-human evolution.<sup>38</sup>

In other words, he is pointing out that the angelic fall was not an *ad hoc* hypothesis invented by modern theologians to deal with a modern problem. The narrative on which it draws for modern apologetic purposes was not created in order to get us out of an apologetic hole. It had been part of the tradition for centuries before being pressed into service as the basis of a possible response to the problem of evolutionary theodicy.

### The Interconnectedness of Flesh and Spirit

The second claim upon which Mascall sees his hypothesis as depending is this:

<sup>36</sup>See Wisdom 2:24, Apocalypse of Abraham, Life of Adam and Eve, Rev. 12:9. (See also the references in W.O.E. Oesterley, *Immortality and the Unseen World* (London: SPCK, 1921), p. 33, fn. 2.) This identification of serpent and Satan was followed mostly, but not universally, by the early church fathers. Justin, Origen, Basil and John Chrysostom followed it, but Ambrose did not. After Augustine, it became standard.

<sup>37</sup>Mascall, *Christian Theology and Natural Science*, p. 36.

<sup>38</sup>Mascall, *Christian Theology and Natural Science*, p. 302.

If there is any truth in such ideas, if the world in God's intention was to be one in which the realms of matter and of spirit were to be linked together in intimate union (as they are, in microcosm, most conspicuously in each individual human being), and if the lower level of this cosmos were to be under the surveillance and loving care of the higher, it seems reasonable to suppose that defection and rebellion in the angelic realm will drastically disorder the material world, and that, while its development in accordance with God's purpose will not be entirely frustrated, it will be grievously hampered and distorted.<sup>39</sup>

For the fall of the angels to have had an impact upon the evolution of the material world, and therefore for it to be useful to Mascall as an explanation for the frustration, violence and cruelty of the evolutionary process, there must be considerable interconnectedness between the different dimensions of creation. He points to two phenomena as evidence for that interconnectedness – the microcosmic and the macrocosmic. By the microcosmic, he means the nature of every individual human being, constituted of both flesh and spirit. He sees the interwovenness of flesh and spirit as being evident in the bi-partite nature of every human person. He is here assuming a Platonic anthropology, which was more widely accepted at the time that he was writing than it would be today. For those who hold to a non-dualistic anthropology,<sup>40</sup> this would carry less evidential weight.

The second supporting (and macrocosmic) evidence he gives for the interconnectedness of the different dimensions of creation is the tradition of angelic care for creation. Interaction between the angelic and human worlds goes back to early biblical tradition, as Jacob's ladder reveals.<sup>41</sup> Furthermore, such interaction could be effectual, powerful and decisive in the protection of Israel, as Elisha's servant is enabled to perceive.<sup>42</sup> Towards the end of the Old Testament period, a belief developed that each nation was represented and defended and protected by a guardian angel. In Daniel's vision, Michael is the 'Prince' of Israel, and his role as her guardian involved fighting against the prince of Persia.<sup>43</sup> It is in the intertestamental period, however, that the nature of the interaction between the angelic and the material creation was most explicitly and richly expounded. The Book of the Watchers, for example, suggests that the angels have an intercessory role to play vis-à-vis humanity: the fallen Watchers who ask Enoch to intercede on their behalf are told, 'It is you who should be petitioning on behalf of men, and not men on your behalf.'<sup>44</sup> In Jubilees, the Watchers are sent to earth with the task of watching over the children of men and instructing them 'to do judgment and uprightness on the earth'.<sup>45</sup> Indeed, in Jubilees the instruction of humanity in things scientific as well as moral was a role God gave to the unfallen Watchers, not, as in

<sup>39</sup>Mascall, *Christian Theology and Natural Science*, p. 36.

<sup>40</sup>See, for example, Warren S. Brown, Nancy Murphy and H. Newton Malony (eds), *Whatever Happened to the Soul? Scientific and Theological Portraits of Human Nature* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998), and Nancy Murphy, *Bodies and Souls, or Spirited Bodies?* (Cambridge: CUP, 2006).

<sup>41</sup>Gen. 28:10–22.

<sup>42</sup>2 Kgs 6:15–17.

<sup>43</sup>Dan. 10. In some other traditions, it is Yahweh himself who acts as Israel's guardian.

<sup>44</sup>1 Enoch 15:2.

<sup>45</sup>Jubilees 4:15.

the Book of the Watchers, an act of wickedness performed by fallen Watchers.<sup>46</sup> This developing account of angelic-human interaction emerges in the New Testament as belief in individual guardian angels.<sup>47</sup>

However, it is not only the human world with which the angels are seen to interact. The intertestamental literature is full of passages which make a close association between the angels and the natural world. In the Book of Jubilees, for instance, we are told that on the first day of creation, God . . .

. . . created the heavens which are above and the earth and the waters and all the spirits which serve before him – the angels of the presence, and the angels of sanctification, and the angels [of the spirit of fire and the angels] of the spirit of the winds, and the angels of the spirit of the clouds, and of darkness, and of snow and of hail and of hoar frost, and the angels of the voices and of the thunder and of the lightning, and the angels of the spirits of cold and of heat, and of winter and of spring and of autumn and of summer and of all of the spirits of his creatures which are in the heavens and on the earth.<sup>48</sup>

The same association is made in the Similitudes, where we encounter ‘the spirit of the sea’ and of the snow and the mist and the dew and the rain, and where we are told that ‘the spirit of the hoar-frost is his own angel, and the spirit of the hail is a good angel’.<sup>49</sup> Similarly, 2 (Slavonic) Enoch not only gives us the delightful picture of angels whose clothing ‘was various singing’,<sup>50</sup> but also tells of the ‘two hundred angels who govern the stars and the heavenly combinations’,<sup>51</sup> ‘the angels who guard the storehouses of the snow and ice’,<sup>52</sup> ‘the angels who guard the treasures of the dew, like olive oil’,<sup>53</sup> angels who look after Paradise,<sup>54</sup> angels who guard the shining crown of the sun,<sup>55</sup> angels who are over seasons and years and rivers and oceans and the fruits of the earth and over every kind of grass.<sup>56</sup> In more prosaic language, Philo writes that ‘God is one, but He has around Him numberless Potencies, which all assist and protect created being’.<sup>57</sup>

This view of interaction between angels and the physical world finds a place in the New Testament<sup>58</sup> and continues into the early church writings. Justin Martyr sees the angels as having been given care over creation.<sup>59</sup> Clement of Alexandria believed that the fallen angels . . .

<sup>46</sup>Jubilees 4:15–22 and 1 Enoch 7–9.

<sup>47</sup>Mt. 18:10.

<sup>48</sup>Jubilees 2:2, trans. R.H. Charles, *The Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1913).

<sup>49</sup>1 Enoch 60:15–22; 61:10.

<sup>50</sup>2 Enoch 1:5.

<sup>51</sup>2 Enoch 4:1.

<sup>52</sup>2 Enoch 5:1.

<sup>53</sup>2 Enoch 6.

<sup>54</sup>8:8.

<sup>55</sup>14:3.

<sup>56</sup>19:4.

<sup>57</sup>De conf.171–75.

<sup>58</sup>See Rev. 7:1; 16:5.

<sup>59</sup>Justin 2 *Apol.* 5.

... had originally been part of a greater hierarchy, which still existed, ordered vertically, from God down to us, and horizontally, with various regiments over nations and cities, and, perhaps, individuals, as well as being set over the planets. The unfallen angels function as agents of divine providence, having co-operated in the production of things below.<sup>60</sup>

For Athenagoras and Justin, this concept of angelic care over creation was combined with the Watcher legend. The latter believed that some of the angels created by God to exercise providential care over creation, led by one special one, the spirit or ruler of matter, fell into impure love, became subjected to the flesh, and begat the giants<sup>61</sup>: 'This opposing spirit was created by God, just as the other angels were created by him and entrusted with administering matter and its forms'.<sup>62</sup> Mascall's unsupported claim that this is a 'firmly based tradition' seems well grounded.

It being a firmly based tradition, however, does not necessarily make it believable, *per se*. Nor does Mascall claim that it does. He is merely pointing out a) that such an understanding did once play a significant role in the understanding of providence; b) that drawing on such an understanding again might help us answer a problem that was then unthought of – a problem with consequent apologetic and pastoral consequences and c) that if we were so to draw upon it again, we would not be introducing concepts into Christian thinking that were novel, alien or *ad hoc*.

However, there is one other consideration, to which Mascall does not point, which would support his contention here, and that is the assumption behind much practice of prayer. Insofar as prayer can involve a request for God to bring about a change in the physical world, as for instance in all prayer for physical healing, it assumes a porousness, an interconnectedness and a significant impactability between the physical and the spiritual dimensions. If we believe that the motion of our lips, larynxes and neurons<sup>63</sup> can make a difference in the spiritual realms, and if we believe that God who is Spirit can intervene therapeutically in the physical wellbeing of those for whom we pray, then we already subscribe to the interconnectedness of the different dimensions of creation that Mascall posits as one of the two necessary underlying assumptions of his hypothesis.

### Mascall's Contribution to Theodicy

Those two necessary underlying assumptions have been shown to be well grounded in Christian tradition from the beginning. Mascall's hypothesis can therefore be stated in a set of propositions:

<sup>60</sup>Francis C.R. Thee, *Julius Africanus and the Early Christian View of Magic*, J.C.B. Mohr, Tübingen, 1984, p. 357, citing *Strom.* 7.2/9.3 and 6.17/157.5.

<sup>61</sup>Thee 1984:341, citing *Plea* 24:2–6.

<sup>62</sup>*Plea*, 25.

<sup>63</sup>Adherents of a Platonic anthropology, who see the immaterial soul as the subject of communion with God in prayer, are not committed to the view that the physical can impact upon the spiritual, but, if praying for physical healing, would thereby demonstrate an implicit belief that the spiritual can impact upon the physical.

1. It is difficult to see pre-human evolution as unambiguously harmonizable with the will of the God we meet in Jesus Christ.
2. Since Darwin, it is not possible to attribute all the aspects of the evolutionary process that are unharmonizable with God to the distorting impact of human sin.
3. Jewish and Christian tradition, however, contains the position of free, intelligent agents who pre-dated the emergence of human beings.
4. Jewish and Christian tradition contains the narrative that those free, intelligent agents rebelled against God prior to the emergence of human beings.
5. So inter-related are the different dimensions of creation that that rebellion brought about dislocation within the development of creation, introducing competition and conflict into creaturely interaction.
6. Such conflict and violence are therefore not to be seen as the work or purpose of the Creator.

If accepted, this would remove the main objection to the family of responses to the problem of evil that see suffering as inimical to the purposes of God. Given the divine assault upon suffering seen in the ministry of Jesus, I suggest that this should be given serious consideration. As a hypothesis, it helps us to say what I suggest we need to say theologically, which is that suffering is in no way the direct work or intention of God, which maximally safeguards the goodness of God. It enables us to say what we need to say scientifically without bringing the findings of modern evolutionary science into conflict with Christian beliefs about either creation or fall.<sup>64</sup> And it enables us to say what I suggest we need to say pastorally to those who are suffering, that their suffering is not the will or the work of God.

### **Taking it Further – and Possibly Too Far!**

Mascall uses the tradition of angelic care for creation as grounding for his claim that the spiritual and material realms are so interconnected that the disruption of one might lead to disturbance within the other. That is necessary for his evolutionary theodicy, because, if there were no such interconnectedness, there would be no reason to believe that a fall within the angelic realm would have any impact upon the development of the material world.

It would be possible, of course, to build a theodical position on the purely negative claim that, in abandoning the care of creation, they were leaving undone those things that they ought to have done; that the removal of angelic care left creation vulnerable to a degree of divinely unintended randomness; that what had been intended to be a guided and protected process of development, became, without that guidance and protection, a process now subject to unintended consequences; that, without the beneficent intentionality and intervention of the angelic realm, developments occurred that had no intrinsic purpose; that given the absence of a divinely intended mode of divine action in the world, there has been thenceforth an hiatus between the world God created and his creational purposes for it; and that the purposes of God cannot now be read off from the way things are.

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<sup>64</sup>For an account of how theistic evolution is compatible with an historic fall, see my 'Theodicy, Fall, and Adam' in Rosenberg, *Finding Ourselves after Darwin*, pp. 257–58.

The language of the intertestamental literature, and indeed its muted biblical equivalents, however, seems to imply the more positive claim of active angelic intervention within the physical world, for good or for ill – for good in such angelically mediated divine interventions as the resurrection of Jesus<sup>65</sup> and the last judgment,<sup>66</sup> and for ill in such demonically mediated distortions of divine order as the debilitation of a daughter of Abraham<sup>67</sup> and the sorrows and sores of Job.<sup>68</sup>

The question that arises here is whether, given the apparent angelic mediation of even such major divine actions as the resurrection of Jesus and the last judgment, *all* divine action might be normatively indirect. If you will excuse the inexact analogies, is the situation between God and the physical world like a bishop respecting the jurisdiction of the Dean and Chapter and refraining from entering their cathedral without their direct invitation? Is it like a vampire not crossing the threshold without being invited over it?! Is all divine action normatively persuasive and not coercive – not because, as Process thought would have it, God is not the source and ultimate owner of all power, but because God has chosen to work within his creation solely through the persuaded agency of his creatures?

This mooted metaphysical self-restraint on God's part might be thought of as having a number of beneficial consequences. It might be thought of as grounding the normatively persuasive mode of God's action in the world in a way that avoids the eschatologically attenuated nature of process theology, and that therefore leaves God with the power to make good on his promise to restore all things at the end of the age.

Secondly, it might be thought of as giving Economic grounding to Austin Farrer's helpful dictum that 'God loves his animal creatures by being God to them . . . not by being a brother creature to them, as he does for mankind in the unique miracle of his incarnation'.<sup>69</sup> As I have commented elsewhere:

The frequently made observation that God, by omitting to perform acts of suffering-prevention that a moderately moral human being would perform, demonstrates thereby either his non-goodness or his non-existence, fails to take into account the seriousness and irrevocability of human vice-regency. We are called to rule,<sup>70</sup> and God, unlike a driving instructor, does not operate a dual control, whereby he may wrest that rule back from us whenever we deviate from his purposes. The words often (and probably wrongly) attributed to St Theresa of Avila, that 'Christ has no body on earth now but yours, no hands but yours, no feet but yours' is *physically-speaking* correct. (Witness the difficulty in thinking of any divine act in Scripture which is not mediated in some way by creaturely agency.) The atheologian's complaint that God's neglect of acts of suffering-prevention which we would not neglect counts against His existence fails, therefore, to give sufficient weight to the decisiveness of the Ascension, too. God's restriction of Himself to *divine* activity and His

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<sup>65</sup>Mt. 28:2.

<sup>66</sup>Mt. 13:39

<sup>67</sup>Lk. 13:16.

<sup>68</sup>Job 1:16; 2:7.

<sup>69</sup>Farrer, *God Almighty and Ills Unlimited*, p. 104.

<sup>70</sup>Gen. 1:28.

refusal to stand in for and supplant *human* activity arguably strengthens the significance, the seriousness and the necessity of our moral action.<sup>71</sup>

I want to stress that Mascall did not suggest that all divine action is indirect, and neither do I. I raise it here because I have found it stimulating to entertain it and the questions it provokes, and I hope that it might similarly stimulate others. Before it could prove fertile for understandings of Providence and divine action, it would have to face a barrage of questions, not least over its compatibility with scientific understandings of natural phenomena. Mascall sees that ‘the discovery that the same physical laws governed the sublunar and supralunar universe should have been thoroughly welcome, for it removed the last vestiges of pagan belief in the divinity of the heavens’<sup>72</sup>; he would not have been prepared to contemplate any understanding of the Economy of God that rowed back on that accomplishment. The question here is whether positing that all divine action in the world is mediated through creaturely agency creates any theological problems that are not created by direct divine action.

## Conclusion

Whether or not one regards the position of divine self-restriction to indirect action through persuasion as being worthy of consideration, Mascall’s extension of the free will argument to include angelic as well as human free will, and thus to open up the chronological possibility of natural evil as well as moral evil being attributable to creaturely rather than divine will removes the main objection to viewing suffering as inimical to the purposes of God.

The instrumental view sees God as being the originator of suffering, but justifies that in terms of its beneficial consequences. The inevitable view also sees God as the originator of suffering, but justifies that in terms of it being the only way of creating a physical world. The inimical view sees *creatures* as being the originators of suffering, and is profoundly uneasy with any such justification. Given the essential place of the goodness of God at the heart of the Christian message,<sup>73</sup> and what I see as the pastoral damage done to the sufferer by ascribing their suffering to God, I suggest that Mascall’s contribution to the study of theodicy – and to the pastoral ministry of the Church – is considerable.

<sup>71</sup>From my ‘Farrer on the Problem of Evil’, in Markus Bockmuehl and Stephen Platten with Nevsky Everett (eds), *Austin Farrer: Oxford Warden, Scholar, Preacher*, (London: SCM Press, 2020), p. 59. The Incarnation might be thought to be a rare example of a divine act in Scripture that is not mediated in some way by creaturely agency: ‘The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you’ (Lk. 1:35). But even there, the Incarnation was in some sense dependent upon what von Balthasar calls ‘the Handmaid’s discreet Yes’, in his *Prayer* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986), p. 79. In some sense, God was ‘invited in’, even in the Incarnation.

<sup>72</sup>Mascall, *Christian Theology and Natural Science*, p. 15.

<sup>73</sup>1 Jn 1:5.