

Christians often face two types of challenges. One type is an objection to our faith, like the so-called Problem of Evil. The other type is more general and concerns how we answer objections. How do we resolve the Problem of Evil using Christian theology? I suspect that second type is the more difficult challenge of the two.

It's easy to hand-wave objections to our faith with the dismissive attitude of an isolationist. It's easy to regurgitate memorized scripts taught by apologists or hand out prewritten tracks without a thought. It's not too hard to learn some philosophical counterarguments that do not consider, much less appeal to, the person and work of Christ. But we would simply trade one loss for another were we to invent the most sophisticated philosophical rebuttal, and at no point employ and exalt the Gospel.

This article aims to show how Christian theology is at the center, and not an addendum, to any successful answer to the objections we Christians face. The Gospel should not be a footnote. It is the first and last defense against unbelief.

This will be demonstrated by looking at a version of the so-called Problem of Evil. This version recently surfaced on the social networking app, Clubhouse. It provides us an opportunity to see how evangelizing and apologizing, sharing the Gospel and argument, can be one and the same thrust.

Borrowing popular acronym, I will refer to the general Problem of Evil as PoE. To the best of my knowledge, the rendition of the PoE we'll be addressing was composed by one friendly atheist named Rob. Whatever the case, it's become associated with him. For fun, I dub his rendition RoE, the Roblem of Evil.

Here it goes:

### Logical problem of evil

P1: If God exists, then God is a morally perfect being.

P2: The world is morally imperfect now.

P3: If God is a morally perfect being, then prior to God creating anything the world was morally perfect.

P4: If God is a morally perfect being, then his actions cannot decrease the degree of moral perfection of the world.

P5: If prior to God creating anything the world was morally perfect and the world is morally imperfect now, then the actions of God has decreased the degree of moral perfection of the world.

C1: If God exists, then his actions cannot decrease the degree of moral perfection of the world. (P1, P4

Hypothetical Syllogism)

C2: If God exists, then prior to God creating anything the world was morally perfect. (P1 and P3 Hypothetical Syllogism)

C3: If the world is morally imperfect now, then if prior to God creating anything the world was morally perfect, then the actions of God has decreased the degree of moral perfection of the world. (P5 Rule of Exportation)

C4: If prior to God creating anything the world was morally perfect, then the actions of God has decreased the degree of moral perfection of the world. (P2, C3 Modus Ponens).

C5: If God exists, then the actions of God has decreased the degree of moral perfection of the world. (C2, C4 Hypothetical Syllogism)

C6: God does not exist (C1, C5 Negation Introduction)

At face value, the crux of RoE is that God cannot create moral imperfection. Doing so would reduce net moral perfection. Since the world is imperfect, God cannot create it, so God cannot exist.

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### What is RoE?

Following Christ's example, let's make sure we understand before we respond. We can start by making two observations. First, note that RoE is a logical PoE. Second, note that RoE is aimed at Abrahamic Monotheism.

The post calls RoE "Logical problem of evil." This epithet pivots on the logical-evidential distinction popularized by modern philosophers. RoE is logical as opposed to evidential.

Evidential PoEs try to show how the preponderance of evil in the world makes God improbable. Logical PoEs do not aim to show that God is merely improbable, but impossible. If successful, a logical problem of evil would demonstrate that God cannot exist because the very concepts of God and evil are incompatible.

(I do not agree with mainstream PoE taxonomy, but that deserves its own post.)

RoE is likely aimed at Abrahamic Monotheism, especially Christianity. Other theologies have escape routes in waiting. Consider: one could deny that evil exists or one could deny that God created the world or one could deny that God is morally perfect. Christians do not have those Pyrrhic victories available.

Anyway, if RoE did not apply to Christianity, then Christians are safe from its charge. Either “the Christian God” can be substituted for “God” or not, and if not, then the argument is irrelevant to our faith. We will move forward presuming “the Christian God” can be substituted.

From this vantage, we see that RoE is a *reductio ad absurdum*. It aims to show that the Christian concept of God and the Christian concept of evil are logically incompatible, which is to say, their conjunction entails a contradiction. This is significant because the vast majority of *reductios* in history are straw men.

RoE must avoid the straw man fallacy. To successfully demonstrate contradiction, the argument will have to faithfully represent God and moral perfection as construed in Scripture. If RoE freighted keyterms with non-Christian ideas, such as defining moral perfection according to Hindu, Hegelian, or humanist notions, then RoE misrepresents Christianity, the *reductio* commits straw man, and the argument fails.

(What is “construed in Scripture” is its own topic. I will take it for granted that I represent Christianity, if imperfectly.)

Crucially, RoE hinges on two ideas: moral perfection and world. But what do these keyterms mean, “morally perfect” and “the world?” Especially, what do they mean on Christianity?

### Prolegomenal Meta-Ethics

Let’s start by talking about moral perfection, specifically God’s. We don’t have space to detail everything about God’s moral perfection. Read a Reformed confession for a doctrinal TL;DR. Read a systematic work, like Calvin’s *Institutes*, Shedd’s *Dogmatic Theology*, Bavinck’s *Reformed Dogmatics*, or Frame’s *DKG*, for more exploration.

Even then, one will only possess an overview, a basic understanding open to the tremendous expansion carried out by hundreds of theologians and philosophers over millennia. I can only offer my view as one humble pebble thrown on the mountain. However, that will suffice.

The important take-away is that by understanding the God and good news of Christianity, we will have our answer to RoE. Four remarks are sufficient to engage RoE.

### *(I) Goodness vs goodness*

There are two different moral perfections. Though different, they are interrelated.

First, there is God's original (capital "G") Goodness, which constitutes His Triune life, the love shared between Father, Son, Spirit. This moral perfection is uncreated, unavailable to anyone but God. Yet, this perfection makes possible a created reflection.

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Then there is created moral perfection. This (lower case "g") goodness constitutes faithfulness to the terms and conditions of God's covenant, which He instituted in the beginning. We will call these terms and conditions the moral law. Created moral perfection is a reflection of God's Triune faithfulness, and is available to any covenant participant, whether the Covenanter or covenantees.

This is why moral imperfection is called sin or transgression. It is a violation of covenant terms and conditions.

### *(II) Moral Personalism*

Because uncreated moral perfection constitutes God's Triune life, non-persons cannot possess it. It is God's Triune nature, and it is unintelligible to attribute God's nature to an abstraction, like a state of affairs, set of facts, or possible world.

Because created moral perfection is a reflection of God's Triune faithfulness and constitutes faithfulness of a covenant participant to the moral law, non-persons cannot possess it. Likewise, created moral imperfection is unfaithfulness to that law. As such, it is unintelligible to attribute created moral perfection or imperfection to abstractions, like a state of affairs, set of facts, or possible world.

### *(III) Ex Lex vs Ex Lege*

As implicit in (I), the moral responsibilities of humans are not (always) the moral responsibilities of God. This holds for one of two reasons, depending on whether we have in view God's Goodness or His goodness.

God's Triune life does not depend on created things whatsoever. It does not depend on the created universe, much less covenants with its creatures. It is free from the terms and conditions of the covenant and so does not depend on the moral law.

Therefore, we can call God's Goodness *ex lex*. "Ex lex" here means Goodness is altogether independent of moral law. It is premundane, and preexists the variety of goodness that coincides with created moral law.

What about God's created moral perfection? God's goodness depends on the moral law. After all, how could God be characterized by faithfulness to the covenant if it doesn't exist? There must exist a creation with which to covenant in order to be faithful to its moral law.

Therefore, we can call God's goodness *ex lege*. It is mediated by the covenant, acquired in time and space through the covenant's moral law.

#### *(IV) Moral Lordship And Moral Knowledge*

It does not follow that God's moral responsibilities are the same as our own just because He is a covenant member or just because He has *ex lege* goodness. Neither is it the case that God's rights are our rights.

Were it the case that God's responsibilities and rights were the same as mankind's, we might be tempted to call the Noahic Flood mass genocide or to think that humans are permitted to reenact it. We could either blame God for mass-murder or claim the right to genocide if we were equals according to the terms and conditions of His covenant.

The Bible is full of useful analogies toward this point. Legal exigencies of a king differ from his subjects, though the law applies to both. Expectations for a father differ from those of his children, though both share in obligation to the family. Only God has the right to forgive, and that is how Jesus demonstrated he was no mere man, but God in flesh (Mark 2:5).

We can summarize this more philosophically by saying that the covenant apportions moral responsibility in proportion to the natures of its members. God obviously differs

from us in knowledge, power, and status. Since God's nature is unique, we should expect Him to hold unique authority and responsibility.

This raises a challenge. How then do we know how to compare His rights to ours? How do we reason about God's responsibilities vs our own? Where do they intersect, overlap or differ?

God's testimony in Scripture. Only the Spirit of God's speech can provide us the knowledge of the covenant required in order to effectively reason about its moral law. That testimony of the Spirit is the Bible, and without it, claims about what God owes us or what He is due stand indemonstrable.

Disclaimer: I am not saying that unbelievers cannot know the moral law apart from Scripture. I am saying they cannot reason effectively about it. The moral knowledge unbelievers have is in spite of their vain reasoning, not because of it, whereas Christians are empowered by the Spirit to reason successfully on the topic.

(As a vantilian, I presuppose the failure of pre-dogmatic natural theology. We cannot cover my reasons here, so we'll have to revisit that issue in another article.)

With these preliminaries out of the way, on to the argument!

### The First Two Premises

P1 is true, though ambiguous. It could mean God is Good, that he possesses the uncreated moral perfection of Triune life. Or it could mean God is good, that He possesses an impeccable track-record of covenant faithfulness. Either way, it's true.

**P1: If God exists, then God is a morally perfect being.**

However, recall that God's ex lex Goodness is not shared with anyone else. RoE applies moral im/perfection to things other than God. That suggests P1 is attributing to God ex lege goodness, the kind common to creatures.

We move to P2 and run into the difficult term “world.” What does “the world” mean? Is it the created universe at a given stage of history, such as the present? Is it some important part or subset of the universe? Is it creation considered as a planned whole, from the beginning to the never-end, as only God knows it? Is it an abstract state of affairs or a hypothetical situation?

## P2: The world is morally imperfect now.

Suppose we practice the following charity. On first reading, and especially if we read it outside the context of RoE, P2 sounds right. We hear in it *the ring of truth*. Therefore, whatever “world” means, let’s assume it means whatever it has to mean in order for P2 to be true on Christianity.

To accomplish this charitable interpretation, we will have to use the same heuristic for the rest of the sentence. We will interpret “morally imperfect” and “now” however they must be interpreted to preserve the truth of P2.

P2 could be taken to mean by “world” and “now” the created universe at this moment. This would be a theoretical collection of all created things at present. But then “morally imperfect” does not apply, because such a collection is an abstraction. That collection is not a person, and so can be neither moral nor immoral.

This is just to apply prolegomenon (II). Planets, shoes, hypotenuse triangles, smells, memories, events, locations, or a complete list of them are not agents with motivation, knowledge, or intent. They are not covenantees. They are not persons, so it makes no sense to say they are morally imperfect.

The same rebuttal applies if “world” means a possible world, hypothetical situation, or a state of affairs. These are not moral agents. Moral properties don’t apply.

Here, we might face some push-back. Even believers might be scratching their heads. Don’t we Christians refer to events, situations, even objects as evil or imperfect? We do, and often. So what gives!

### When are Impersonals Imperfect?

We should observe that “imperfection,” like “bad” or “evil,” has different senses. Consider four examples. We call a botched painting imperfect. We call death imperfect. We call the Holocaust imperfect. We call Satan evil or imperfect. Are we attributing in all four instances the same property, the same kind of imperfection? The answer should be obvious, but let’s explore this a bit.

Importantly, Satan is a person. When we call Satan imperfect, we normally have in mind his violation of moral law, his covenant unfaithfulness. We straightforwardly mean to attribute moral imperfection. Our other three examples are a bit different.

Consider what botched paintings, mortality, and the Holocaust all have in common. They're not persons. You cannot persecute or sentence or punish them. You cannot reward them and it makes no sense to praise them for virtue. You cannot hold them accountable at all. They lack knowledge, motive, intent; they cannot exemplify vice or virtue. God nowhere treats such objects as His moral subjects in Scripture.

Just by considering what these things are, we see they cannot possess moral perfection or imperfection. What's really going on is that we have different kinds of perfection and imperfection, or at least, an indirect way of addressing moral perfection. Let's briefly consider these options.

### *Aesthetic & Praxic Imperfection*

Envision a botched painting. Perhaps you recall, as I do, that scene from *Hercules*. A bad painting is imperfect, but in what way?

I submit that ruined paintings are aesthetically imperfect. What this means is that the painting stands in contrast to some value of beauty. It exists out of accord with some principle of beauty.

Sloppy paintings, those inviting their own painter's frustration, are cases of both aesthetic and praxic imperfection. The painting by itself suffers aesthetic imperfection. But further, the painter failed to follow some artistic method and failed to accomplish his goal, meaning he acted in contrast to some value of wisdom and acted out of accord with some principle of prudence.

Both ugliness and imprudence, aesthetic and praxic imperfection, are tied to moral imperfection but are not themselves moral imperfection. They are not themselves sin, though the three are entangled. To see clearly how they interconnect, let's address another type of imperfection.

### *Nomological Imperfection & the Symptom Observation*

Consider death. Killing is not inherently morally imperfect, as sometimes justice or survival demand it. However, Christians recognize mortality, the inherent biological degradation of living beings unto death, as an imperfection.

Mortality, alongside disease, disabilities, catastrophes, and suffering, are what philosophers call natural evils. Natural evil, in contradistinction from agential evil, is not unfaithfulness to God's covenant, but corruption of the things God has made. It is the decay of mother nature, the unhealthy condition of organisms, the loss of shape given to the sculpture by the Sculptor, until the figure dissolves back into that unshaped chaos of Genesis 1:2.

We can call this nomological imperfection. Where aesthetic imperfection contrasts against beauty, praxic imperfection contrasts against prudence, and moral imperfection contrasts against covenant faithfulness, nomological imperfection contrasts against natural order.

Nomological imperfection is what theologians identify with the natural effects of sin, which is itself part of God's curse for the Fall. Nomological imperfection is a consequence of moral imperfection. As a consequence of sin, nomological is distinct from moral imperfection as cause from effect, symptom from root.

This helps us understand how non-moral imperfections relate to moral imperfections. All non-moral imperfections are symptoms of moral imperfection. They are various consequences of sin on different aspects of created reality, like cancers in different parts of the body that might have gotten there after years of bad diet choices.

Alright, so far so good, but isn't the Holocaust evil? It's not just aesthetically or nomologically imperfect. What do we make of that?

We call the Holocaust evil, and it is. Yet, the Holocaust is an historic event, not a person, right? Not so fast. There are actually two ways to make sense of saying the Holocaust is evil without expressing the absurd claim that historic events can be unfaithful to God's covenant.

### *Metonym*

Let's start with metonym. If you're not familiar, a metonym occurs when the word for one object is used in place of a second, to which the first is immediately related. Let me explain.

People often say, "Pass me some coffee." When this is said, we don't mean for someone to somehow toss hot brown liquid at us from across the table. We don't want a scoop of coffee offered to us in cupped hands either. Rather, we are requesting the

drinking *cup* that contains coffee. We have metonymically requested the cup by naming something closely associated with it, its liquid contents.

Here's another example closer to our Holocaust language. Someone gives you a cup of coffee and you refer to it as "a kindness." No one woodenly means to say that a drink or container has the property of being kind, or that it is kindness incarnate. What we mean is that the coffee is a token of the giver's virtue. We metonymically refer to the kindness of the giver by praising some consequence of their actions, one that proves their kindness, in this case the gifted coffee.

Sometimes, this is the unspoken trick in our Holocaust talk. When we pronounce, "The Holocaust is evil," we do not strictly mean to attribute moral properties to historical events. Rather, we are metonymically condemning the Nazis by referring to a token of their moral imperfection, namely the historic Holocaust, which consists in nomological imperfection suffered by Holocaust victims.

We can call this metonymical imperfection. Metonymical imperfection is not so much its own category of imperfection as it is a distinct way of speaking about moral imperfection, usually via nomologically imperfect consequences.

We might consider the story of Nadab and Abihu an example of metonymical evil. The strange (read: imperfect) fire they offered wasn't itself evil. Fire cannot possess moral properties. Rather, the fire was a token of moral imperfection in its offerers.

Sometimes metonymical imperfection involves aesthetic or praxic imperfections as well. For example, Christians are known for calling certain films and books evil, not to mention pornography. This is often a case of metonym. We are not accusing media of covenant unfaithfulness. Instead we are accusing the authors of covenant unfaithfulness by metonymic association with the aesthetically imperfect consequences of their actions.

### *Collective Imperfection*

The other way we speak of the Holocaust as evil is a bit more complicated. It presupposes emergence. Emergence, as in, properties of wholes systemically emerge from individuals. When we speak in this systemic or emergent way, "the Holocaust" doesn't mean a set of historic events per se, but rather, actions taken by a united group of people, the Nazis.

Frege's sense-reference distinction is useful here. We have one referent, one historic reality, the Holocaust. However, there are different conceptions of that one referent and therefore different ways we can speak about it, different senses.

Under the domain of historiology, and so pictured as the bare march of time, we would say, "the Holocaust happened to people." The semantic content is little more than a date and its circumstances. Under the domain of ethics, and so picture as collective agency, we would say, "Nazi Germany *did* the Holocaust *to* people." Big difference.

In the US, this way of talking is even more common for 9/11. People conceive of 9/11 as an attack schemed and accomplished by Al-Qaeda, not merely a terrible happening. As a result, "9/11," the word, is being used in the sense of collective agency. "9/11 is evil" really means, "That Al-Qaeda did 9/11 is evil," or something like that.

Another easy example is the Transatlantic Slave Trade. When we say, "Slavery is evil," what we sometimes mean by "slavery" is neither a generic social practice nor a mere set of events attached to a date, though those are both in view. Rather, we sometimes mean to emphasize collective agency, that of one historic market united around a singular trade. "Slavery is evil," really means, "What the slave market did is evil."

We dub this collective imperfection. Philosophers sometimes call it systemic evil. Our takeaway is this: these are people, not events, actions, not happenings.

The Bible acknowledges collective imperfection, especially where people are judged as groups rather than individuals. Sodom and Gomorrah, Egypt, and the Philistines are some examples. The most virulent collective imperfection is disbelief.

Like metonymical, collective imperfection is not really a unique category of imperfection. It is a unique way of talking about moral imperfection by condemning groups and the agency of collectives rather than addressing mere individuals.

It is important to note about both metonymical and collective imperfection that they require ordinary moral imperfection. They are extensions of individual moral imperfection, and do not obtain by themselves apart from the unfaithfulness of covenantees at the individual level. Therefore, we cannot attribute metonymical or collective imperfection unless there are individual persons who could, at least in principle, be held responsible on their own, apart from the tokens and groups with which they associate.

We see the severity and care of God's judgment in the story of Lot. When theophany appears to Abraham, when angels rescue Lot's family, and when Lot's wife turns to salt, God demonstrates His sharp disaste for guilt by association. God does not carelessly reduce individual responsibility to collective, nor does He avoid punishing collectives once the appropriate exceptions are dealt with. The two are held in tandem.

In summary, “imperfection” can be a number of things. Some imperfections do not pertain to morality except as symptom. Some do, but are indirect ways of speaking. This ambiguity is why P2 is difficult. However, after this long diatribe, we’re in a position to give a clear interpretation of P2.

### How P2 is a Stumbling Block

The only interpretation of P2 for which the sentence expresses a Christian truth is if “morally imperfect” and “world” together refer to parts of creation that constitute metonymical imperfection, collective imperfection, or both.

(Although P2 says “now,” I read this quintessentially. That is, “now” does not mean the present moment necessarily, but any moment, which will always be “now” at that moment.)

P2 means, in other words, that the world includes tokens of morally imperfect agents and actions of morally imperfect collectives. This interpretation of P2 is hugely problematic for RoE. The main reason why it’s a problem is because the next three premises do not retain P2’s sense of imperfection and world. They equivocate, and they equivocate *badly*.

In P2, “the world” means (relevant) parts of the created world. So it refers indirectly to covenantees. However, in P3 “the world” refers to something uncreated because it’s “prior to God creating anything.” So P3’s “world” cannot be P2’s “world.”

Additionally, if P3’s “world” is supposed to be an abstraction, like a state of affairs or a set, P3 is false anyway. Remember, abstractions are not persons. They cannot be moral or immoral because they cannot be faithful or unfaithful to the covenant in the first place.

There’s a further problem with P3. Let’s suppose we interpret P3 however it must be interpreted to be true on Christianity. On that approach, because P3’s “world” is uncreated, and only God Himself is uncreated, P3’s “world” language can only refer to God, albeit inappropriately. By the same logic, moral perfection in P3’s antecedent

clause is God's Triune life. That makes "world" and "morally perfect" equivocal, both compared to P2 as well as other premises.

If that's unclear, let's rewrite P3 to illustrate what P3 must mean if it is to be true on Christianity:

P3<sup>1</sup>: If God has Triune love, then prior to God creating anything God has Triune love.

This is not only tautological by itself, but it's equivocal compared to other premises. This version of P3, while true, lends no support to RoE.

We have almost the same equivocation in P4. Does "world" mean God or an abstraction? P4 is false at face value if it attributes moral properties to abstractions. Alternatively, P4 is true if "world" is God, but then it's equivocal to P2 and other premises, lending no support to RoE.

There is a much deeper intrigue hidden within P4. Should someone try to reformulate RoE to avoid impersonalizing moral agency as the argument presently does, that reformulator might notice a (much stronger) PoE insinuated by P4. For P4 might suggest that it is a violation of moral law when someone, such as God, causes (instances of) violations of moral law, and since God does cause said violations, God violates the moral law. Therefore, God is morally imperfect.

That is a very important objection to cover, but unfortunately it takes us beyond the scope of RoE, and so this article. We will discuss this a little bit, at least, during our discussion of P5. Stay tuned.

### P5's Triple Blunder

We've come to the pièce de résistance of theological confusion. In P5, we have at work no less than *three* different senses of "world" present in *one* single sentence. Let's divulge this doozy.

P5: If prior to God creating anything the world was morally perfect and the world is morally imperfect now, then the actions of God have decreased the degree of moral perfection of the world.

The first mention of "world" in P5 occurs within the antecedent clause and it's supposed to exist "prior to God creating anything" (read: uncreated). You know the drill: is that world abstract or God's Triune life? If "world" is abstract, moral properties do not apply.

Something weird happens if we take the alternative. If “world” is God, and it must be to avoid straw man, then the antecedent can be rewritten as follows:

P5<sup>1</sup>: If God is morally perfect and the world is morally imperfect, then God has decreased the degree of moral perfection of the world.

Notice that God’s moral perfection is irrelevant to this conditional claim. That is, mentioning it adds no logically informative content. If we remove “God is morally perfect” and keep the rest, nothing is lost or gained. So we will remove it for clarity.

We move on to the second mention of “world,” at the end of the antecedent clause. This repeats P2 verbatim, suggesting the world there must be P2’s “world.” On that interpretation, “world” is not God or an abstraction, and so is equivocal compared to P3 and P4. It is also equivocal to the former and following use of the term in this sentence.

Moving now to the final mention of “world” in P5, we come to the end of the consequent clause and the very end of the sentence. What does this last “world” mean or refer to? For starters, it cannot be P5’s first mention “prior to creation.” Then it would just mean God Himself. Observe:

P5<sup>2</sup>: If the world is morally imperfect now, then the actions of God has decreased the degree of God’s moral perfection.

That this reading doesn’t work seems too painfully obvious to require further comment, but we’ll cover it just in case. P5<sup>2</sup> faces at least two problems.

First, covenant violations and change (can) only exist in creation. Remember, God’s uncreated moral perfection does not depend on creation, so it is not subject to change. Assuming God’s ex lex Goodness can change is not only tantamount to denying Christian theology, it confuses Creator and creature categories.

It’s like misascribing an author with fictional qualities of his art. Imagine the look even unbelievers might give someone who said a gamer couldn’t program some video game because his mana had run dangerously low.

Second, P5<sup>2</sup> is a non-sequitur. Why would either of God’s moral perfections decrease simply because metonymical/collective imperfection has increased across history? Where did the argument show that increase of sin entails the decrease of God’s moral perfection? There is no reason in the premise itself or in RoE to answer this question.

Indeed, P5<sup>2</sup> highlights one common denominator of all PoEs. Their key premise is never demonstrated or justified. More on that later.

Okay, we have shown the last instance of “world” in P5 cannot be God, but what can it mean? It can’t be an abstraction or else the conditional is plainly false. Let’s sound the broken record player: only persons can have moral properties, and so the consequent of P5 cannot follow from any antecedent whatsoever if it attributes moral properties to a non-person.

We might be tempted at this point to think that the final sense of “world” in P5 is the same as P2. In that case the premise is logically vacuous. It would read something like this:

P5<sup>3</sup>: If the world includes moral imperfection, then the actions of God has made the world include moral imperfection.

Maybe there’s a context in which P5<sup>3</sup> is substantive, but RoE ain’t one. Whatever the entailment is supposed to be, P5<sup>3</sup> does not logically support any conclusions made later.

I am left to surmise that both P4 and P5 suggest some kind of charge that God has violated the law by causing others to violate it. However, most of RoE does not explore, pursue, or articulate that version of PoE. We can explore this to a very limited extent by trying one last sense of “world.”

The very last conceivable sense of “world” at work here is that of God’s complete idea. It is God’s exhaustive plan for creation, beginning to end, no facts left out. We’ll call this the Plan for simplicity’s sake.

The Plan includes God’s planning. It is both God’s *creating* and the creation *created*, activity and object, and that is why it plausibly bypasses the objection that RoE is attributing moral properties to non-persons. If the Plan is imperfect, so is God, because if God plans imperfectly, He is imperfect.

We have a candidate that might work this time:

P5<sup>4</sup>: If the world is morally imperfect, then the Plan is morally imperfect.

While RoE would still require significant reformulation in the surrounding premises, this reading significantly “steel-mans” the objection, that is, most strongly represents

it. For the Bible itself recognizes that if God's Plan, that is His planning, could be imperfect in any way, then so too would He be imperfect (cf. Romans 9:6).

However, the mistake in that reasoning has already been exposed by Christendom for millennia now. It is a mistake all-too-common to PoEs.

### Compositional Blunder

Recall our charitable interpretation of P2. There exists at any time moral imperfection which we call "the world" metonymically or collectively. Only (the relevant) parts of God's plan are imperfect. Does it follow that the whole is?

Carelessly jumping to that conclusion is fallacious. The composition fallacy occurs when we assume that what is true of the parts is also true of the whole. P5<sup>4</sup> commits a compositional fallacy since we would be assuming that the imperfection of the parts is the imperfection of the whole.

In case this is not obvious to the reader, consider three examples. Car tires may be black and rubbery, but it does not follow that the car is black or rubbery. Sammy Hagar, Joe Satriani, Chad Smith, and Michael Anthony are fabulous musicians on their own. Yet, their supergroup Chickenfoot was a musical disaster. Not every Egyptian individually forbid Israel from leaving their captivity, but the whole of Egypt did (via Pharaoh).

The inverse is also true and is called the fallacy of division. We cannot assume that what goes for the whole necessarily goes for the parts. Your car may be red or white or green, but that doesn't make the dash-cam any of those colors. America may be a political powerhouse, but that doesn't make every citizen one. No matter *Alice in Chains'* songwriting genius, Jerry Cantrell pales in comparison.

True, P5 might reasonably be construed as avoiding the repeated error of attributing moral imperfection to a non-person. Instead, it runs face-first into the composition fallacy.

### *What is the Composition Fallacy?*

The composition fallacy is complicated because it is not formal but informal. Meaning, the error is not primarily to do with the logical structure of the inference, but with the mishandling of particular facts. Douglas Wilson provides an illustration I recycle here.

The Atlantic ocean is surely very very heavy. If it were possible to put the whole ocean in a tank and weigh that tank on a scale, we should be impressed. It doesn't follow that a pail filled with the Atlantic ocean is heavy. We would err to reason from the Atlantic ocean's holistic weight to the weight of its parts.

However, the Atlantic ocean is saline, salt water. This chemical, ecosystematic fact does imply that a pale of the Atlantic ocean will be salty. That inference follows. This goes to show that sometimes wholes imply the properties of parts (and vice versa) and sometimes they do not. It depends on the nature of the thing, the details in context, the particularities of the topic.

I submit that the essence of the compositional fallacy lies in assumptiveness. It occurs when we reason that what's true of the parts is *automatically* true of the whole, and vice versa, rather than *situational*ly true. When we consider P5<sup>4</sup>, as RoE provides no situational data to support the conditional, the compositional inference is motivated by nothing but an assumption.

### *The Underlying Straw Man*

RoE has assumed, without defense or citation of supporting Christian doctrine, that the moral imperfection of parts entails moral imperfection of the whole. It therefore takes the inference to be automatic, rather than situational. It assumes what it ought to prove.

Importantly, the inference RoE makes would certainly apply to human planning! It is true that the presence of morally imperfect parts does entail moral imperfection of the whole where human planning is concerned. This is because humans have a moral responsibility to avoid planning any moral imperfection whatsoever. We have no right to plan moral imperfection.

*If* you merely assume God's Plan is no different than human plans or that His responsibilities are no different than our own, then P5<sup>4</sup> follows. But as we covered in Prolegomena (III) and (IV), God's covenant responsibilities are not always those of humans, wherefore we cannot reason whether they are apart from Scripture. This suggests that Rob and other proponents of RoE have not done their Biblical homework.

The motivation for RoE's compositional fallacy is obvious: its author neglected (interchangeably) the creature-Creator distinction and Biblical exegesis. With this negligence, RoE forgets that God is not merely a creature, not merely another covenantee, but the Lord of lords and King of kings. His nature is unique, His

covenant rights higher than His subjects, and so we are not permitted epistemically or morally to infer our responsibilities are automatically His responsibilities. That constitutes bumbling, treasonous arrogance.

Sadly, that arrogance well summarizes RoE, as we shall see.

### *Positive Exegetical Counterevidence*

Consider further that the redemptive plan of God explicitly defies the compositional inference of P5<sup>4</sup>. Scripture provides us dozens of shining counterexamples. Let's consider four: two broad soteric principles and two historic cases where morally imperfect parts do not indicate a morally imperfect whole.

First, the already-not-yet. Although believers remain tainted with sin, Paul's "old man," their core identity is hidden in the sinlessness of Christ (Col 3:3). Although our present life anticipates a future transformation at resurrection, so that we sin no more, that future event corresponds to a present total forensic righteousness (cf. Romans 5-6). We are holistically (because forensically) morally perfect right now, even though our life is riddled with morally imperfect parts.

Second, *felix culpa*. Although the world is rife with all manner of imperfection, these are but occasions of Christ's glory (Rom 5:20-21; 8:19-21), and as such work to magnify the holistic perfection of the Plan. The thesis of God's story comes to summary fruition at the resurrection and judgment, wherefore Paul says all things are brought together in Christ (Eph 1:10).

Third, remember the story of Joseph (Gen 37-50). Throughout, a structural theme of Genesis recurs. In the midst of moral imperfections, individual and systemic, God's redemptive goal not only prevails through morally imperfect agents, but does so through their morally imperfect choices.

This theme of superintention is stated with shocking clarity by Joseph. Gen 50:20 reads, "As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today."

Paraphrasing Joseph, although God includes evil parts in the Plan, the morally imperfect parts are instruments of a greater perfect end. The Plan is good because the parts result in an ultimate good – God's redemptive goal. This is sometimes called a greater-good theodicy in philosophy.

Fourth and finally, no one articulated that compatibility of the morally perfect Plan with its morally imperfect parts more clearly than Peter. The Spirit of God speaking through Peter teaches, in various passages, that the Messiah is no less than God's justification for evil in the world (cf. Acts 2:23-24, 1 Pet 1:20). (Paul further clarifies this claim in Romans 9.)

More could be said, but these four points suffice. Christianity comes precured with an exegetical reason to reject P5<sup>4</sup>'s compositional reasoning. On Christianity, morally imperfect parts in this world absolutely do not entail moral imperfection of the Plan.

It is not enough to say they do not call into question the Plan. Let us state it more radically. To the contrary, they help *demonstrate* the moral perfection of the Plan.

Let us then summarize P5<sup>4</sup>'s error. It is a compositional fallacy because it assumes that imperfection in the parts automatically, rather than on situational justification, implies imperfection of the whole. This fallacy is motivated by a neglect of Prolegomena (III) & (IV), neglect of Scriptural teaching, and neglect of the creature-Creator distinction broadly. Its motivation constitutes a straw man caricature of Christianity. Therefore, P5 involves two fallacies, composition and straw man.

By addressing RoE's failure to appreciate the Christian theology it pretends to internally critique, we come full circle to the Gospel. The RoE is not just an illogical mistake, but it is an occasion to remember why the Plan is morally perfect.

We can say this to the Robs of our world: No doubt! The world is brimming with moral imperfection, evil. But evil exalts Jesus all the more! For our king has defeated evil. Who knows this better than Christians? Once we were blind, dead puppets of sin. We were the villains. We deserved to be killed by God, but that is why Jesus is so good. He is something more than a mere cartoon hero fighting criminals. He saves them. He mends the blind, resurrects the dead, liberates the puppets of sin, restoring our moral humanity. More, he adopts God's enemies, brothers of Son, making them children of the Father.

Ultimately, to complain that God has included evil in His Plan is to deny the goodness of the gift, the Gospel, because it is to deny that Jesus is a worth-while reason to endure evil. And as P5<sup>4</sup> makes clear, RoE proponents have no basis for this complaint except odorous arrogance.

### RoEing Back Upstream

The intellectual sins of RoE are equivocation, composition, and the fallacy we anticipated from the outset and historically prominent of *reductio ad absurdum*: straw man. But what motivates one to make them?

A diagnosis of this motivation should not harp too much on Rob's logical sloppiness or his mere theological inaccuracies. Many unbelievers are perfectly intelligent. No, the root cause is sin, evil, moral imperfection. What sin, you might ask?

Rob's sin is an indolent, assumptive attitude with which the topic of theology is approached, according to which the Bible is not seriously considered, nor is the *sui generis* nature of its Creator appreciated, whether existentially or philosophically. In other words, Rob approaches meta-ethics having already taking the innocence and sufficiency of his mind for granted.

Let's illustrate the explanatory power of this diagnosis with a thought experiment. Suppose we reject the Christian picture of meta-ethics outlined in our *Prolegomena*. Suppose we assume Rob's atheism momentarily, or an outlook like it.

### *Vantage of Worldview*

From this hypothetical vantage, we do not acknowledge God, let alone consider Him essential to meta-ethics, and so we approach related topics without distinguishing created moral perfection from uncreated. For us, human moral perfection, if it exists at all, does not derive from God as a reflection of His Triune faithfulness mediated through a covenant. Two interlocked consequences follow.

On the one hand, we lose any presiding reason to think that moral properties only apply to persons. Because goodness is not primarily to do with the personhood of God, impersonal artifacts like Platonic forms and irreducible norms, are on the table as candidate explanations for morality.

On the other, we lose any presiding reason to humble ourselves and view our faculty of reason as incapable of elucidating meta-ethics without revelatory aid. Because we recognize no divine covenant with or revelation from God, we are not only free to determine on our own which candidates are the best explanations for morality. We also have no reason by default to consider Biblical teaching important to that enterprise.

Instead, we will view Christianity as just one competing theory among equals. As a result, all Christian meta-ethical tenets, such as our *Prolegomena* above – no matter

how important they may be – must be taken less seriously than, because they will be subjected to, our trust in our own minds to judge the matter for ourselves.

In so doing, we will take it for granted that no Christian doctrine can falsify the default mysteriousness of meta-ethics or usurp the self-sufficiency of our own minds. If Christianity wants to be a candidate, it must play by the rules, get in line, and wait its turn, which is to say, its doctrines must coincide with our original outlook on meta-ethics as an open question alongside our religious faith in the faculty of reason to answer it.

Of course, this is just to deny Christianity from the outset. If Christianity is true, meta-ethics is not only a question we cannot answer on our own, but it is already answered for us by God. On Christianity, meta-ethics is neither open to non-Christian candidates nor penetrated by reason alone, but covenantal, Trinitarian, and revealed in Scripture.

By assuming otherwise, Rob and company have surrendered themselves to a blind faith in human reason. This blind faith works as a presiding motivation to subjugate, hold in contempt, or outright deny this or that element of the Gospel wherever it challenges that faith. It is no wonder then that Rob fumbles our Prolegomena, fails to exegete his premises from Scripture, and generally neglects the creature-Creator distinction: that is all to be expected from someone who's god is their own mind.

We asked what the sin is at bottom motivating the errors of RoE. That sin is an autotheistic deification of our own minds over against the word of God and the God of the word. It is to believe whatever we want to believe instead of believing the good news given by the Spirit in Scripture.

That is not merely intellectual. This concerns one's eternal destiny. This is suicide par excellence because to put blind faith in oneself over against God is not just irrational, it is to prefer an eternity in hell feeling free instead of being forever freed in Christ.

### In Conclusion

Recall that our purpose for this article was to demonstrate how Christians can respond to objections in a Gospel-magnifying way. We illustrated this by refuting RoE. For the substance of our rebuttal was to remember and clarify Christian theology.

For Christians, God's Triune life is Goodness, an uncreated, exhaustively personal moral perfection. This ex lex Goodness can be reflected in goodness, a created, exhaustively personal moral perfection, exemplified by covenant members when they stay true to God's covenant, its terms and conditions.

We saw that RoE fails to esteem the distinctives of this Christian meta-ethic. Its various equivocations and compositional fallacy rest on a straw man that denies the above distinctives.

If Rob had appreciated that his reason is not sufficient on its own, that God is essential to meta-ethics, and that divine revelation is needed to reason about God's responsibilities, Rob would have remembered:

- God is not automatically subject to creaturely responsibilities
- People, not abstractions, can be morally imperfect
- God's perfect plan for the universe is not susceptible to the imperfections of its parts

Instead, it is clear that Rob has too high a view of himself and approaches God as if He were merely a creature, for this explains why Rob carelessly assumed:

- God's perfection is no better than creaturely perfection, subject to the same exigencies
- God, like everyone else, is just an inhabitant of abstract states of affairs, where moral properties are not persons-only.
- God's plan is, at best, just a better version of creaturely plans, and so is susceptible to the same doubts we have about our own plans

By ignoring the prolegomenal distinctives, RoE implicates its proponents in arrogance. The motivation for the argument requires a trade: trust in divine testimony for blind faith in our own minds. In this way, those who make this argument betray their sin of hubris and philosophical delusions of grandeur.

One way to clarify what we have accomplished here is to say that we have run a transcendental critique. We have shown, using little more than Christian theology, a basic understanding of fallacies, and a bit of linguistic charity, that RoE is false and it is false in such a way that no one can promulgate it without betraying their sinful need for Christ. In that way, RoE is evidence for Christianity and it is an occasion for Rob and company to be reminded, the only answer to sin is the blood of Christ.