

## **Belief-In and Belief-That as a Solution to the Problem of Evil**

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### ABSTRACT

This paper addresses the dialogue between Anthony Flew and Basil Mitchell's discussion regarding the Problem of Evil in "Theology and Falsification: A Symposium" and analyzes their discussion in terms of belief-in and belief-that. I will use the distinction between belief-in and belief-that to argue against Flew's claim that Christians are unable to give a satisfactory response to the Problem because they make contradictory qualifications. I argue that if we understand Christianity as belief-in rather than belief-that (as Mitchell does), we can correctly identify what occurs when Christians make qualifications in response to the Problem. My aforementioned argument, coupled with some additional incorrect assumptions Flew makes about Christianity, work together to support my claim that it is perfectly coherent for Christians not to provide an explanation for specific instances of suffering. As long as one views Christian belief as belief-in, the Problem of Evil is accounted for in the Christian framework.

Keywords: Anthony Flew, Basil Mitchell, belief in, belief that, Christianity, Problem of Evil

# Belief-In and Belief-That as a Solution to the Problem of Evil

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## INTRODUCTION

Anthony Flew and Basil Mitchell's discussion in "Theology and Falsification: A Symposium" has captured intuitive responses held by individuals on both sides of the religious debate concerning the nature of theistic belief. Flew and Mitchell's dialogue concerns the Christian God; hence, I focus on a defense of the *internal coherency* of Christianity and utilize Christian theology. According to Flew, Christian responses to the Problem of Evil (POE) are contradictory and unsatisfactory. Mitchell, on the other hand, believes that Christianity is able to respond to the POE affectively and that Flew has an incorrect understanding of the nature of Christian belief. In this paper, I will consider the distinction between belief-in and belief-that as a response to the POE and to better understand the discussion of Flew and Mitchell. Flew seems to think that religious belief is belief-that; it is fully reducible to a determinate set of propositions, leaving it vulnerable to contradiction. Mitchell believes that religious belief is belief-in and adheres to a more complex view of the development and response of Christianity to the POE.

I will first present some distinctions between belief-in and belief-that. Then, I will discuss Flew's argument. I argue that because Flew fails to take the nuances of evaluative belief-in into consideration in his argument,

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his argument mischaracterizes Christianity and thus fails to criticize it. I will discuss how Mitchell's objection correctly captures Christianity through the underlying assumptions about evaluative belief-in and belief-that in his argument. I will build my own objections to Flew upon Mitchell's objection, and finally I will consider an objection to my view and respond to it. I conclude that the rational basis for making qualifications, the "God-centered" nature of Christianity, the fully unknowable nature of God, and the Christian's trust in God make it such that Christians do not need to provide an explanation for specific instances of suffering. In addition, Christian belief embodies the structure and characteristics of belief-in and accurately captures how the Christian engages in her relationship with God. Such a perspective is necessary for non-Christians to consider when arguing against the internal coherence of Christianity and for Christians to consider to better understand the nature of their faith.

## **2. BELIEF-IN AND BELIEF-THAT**

My goal in this section is to explain the differences between belief-in (more specifically, evaluative belief-in) and belief-that. I will use the same terminology used by H. H. Price in "Belief 'In' and Belief 'That'." The Book of James (2:19) describes an intuitively appealing case of belief-that: the demons believe the *proposition* that there is one God, and they shudder. This example implies that there is a difference between belief-that and belief-in, as the demons only possess the former. Belief-in takes as its objects personal or non-personal entities and, according to Price, necessarily involves attitudes of esteem and trust.<sup>2</sup> Belief-that is directed towards a proposition or something "essentially proposition-like."<sup>3</sup> For example, I believe that UCLA is located in Southern California. Since the demons only have belief-that and no belief-in, the belief that the Christian

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<sup>2</sup> H. H. Price, "Belief 'In' and Belief 'That'," *Religious Studies* 1, no. 1 (1965): 15.

<sup>3</sup> Michelle Montague, "Against Propositionalism," *Nous* 41, no. 3, (2007): 503.

God exists is compatible with their attitude of hatred and fear towards God.

It is important to note a further distinction within belief-in. There is factual belief-in and evaluative belief-in. Factual belief-in can be reduced to belief-that—one believes in something in the factual sense.<sup>4</sup> For example, if I say I believe in Abraham Lincoln, I am just expressing my belief that there was such a person who does possess the characteristics commonly attributed to him. On the other hand, evaluative belief-in cannot be reduced to belief-that because reductive analyses fail to render the nuances of evaluative belief-in—namely the characteristic of trust—into propositions.<sup>5</sup> Also, I argue that evaluative belief-in is not factitive—just because someone believes in something does not make it true. I agree with Price’s view that evaluative belief-in cannot be reduced to belief-that, and I will use Price’s characterization of evaluative belief-in and belief-that when explaining Flew and Mitchell’s arguments. From now on, when I use “belief-in,” I am referring to evaluative belief-in.

When Price’s framework of belief-in is applied to belief in God, it is clear that belief in God cannot be reduced to a finite set of propositions. Flew fails to take this into consideration in his argument, and I will later show how such a mistake is fatal to his argument. The important characteristics in belief in God that I wish to apply to the POE include esteeming God, trust, and prospectiveness (these are all Price’s terms). According to Price, esteeming God can be reduced to a set of propositions by using the phrases “good at...” and “good thing that....” For example, one can say that God is good at loving humans (perhaps even that, compared to all other personal entities that exist, he is the best at loving us) and it is a good thing that God is good at loving humans. However, this shows that only a certain aspect of evaluative belief-in can be reduced to belief-that. Price claims

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<sup>4</sup> Price, “Belief ‘In’ and Belief ‘That,’” 10.

<sup>5</sup> Price, “Belief ‘In’ and Belief ‘That,’” 25.

trust, however, is not reducible to belief-that because although believing certain propositions is necessary condition for trust (namely that the trustee has characteristics that indicate it can be trusted), that does not mean they are sufficient for trust. Just because I accept a certain number of propositions about God does not guarantee that I trust him. These propositional beliefs play a certain role in one's belief in God, but they are not constitutive of belief-in. Furthermore, belief-in God is prospective: it has a reference to the future.<sup>6</sup> In other words, when I believe in God, I not only believe that he his good, but that he will continue to be good.

Finally, I argue that the proper name "God" is not a description but rather a rigid designator in the Kripkean sense, which has important implications for the relationship between belief-that and belief-in. One can talk about an object (i.e. use a name) without associating a description with it.<sup>7</sup> This is especially important with regards to Christianity, since it involves a textual tradition that uses the name "God" but also connects Him to different descriptions at different times (e.g. pre-Messianic era and post-Messianic era).<sup>8</sup> Thus, belief-in does not necessitate that there be descriptive content associated with a name. So the question then becomes: what is the importance of belief-that (propositional and/or descriptive content) in Christian belief? Since non-Christians and Christians alike can talk about God without needing any descriptive or propositional content, why should belief-in be any different?

One can *talk* about something (e.g. hold belief-that statements) without having a conception of what it is, but one cannot *believe in* something (the object of belief is not restricted to God only) without having a correct conception of what it is. Certain descriptive belief-that statements are necessary in having a correct conception of God. This not only prevents the

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<sup>6</sup> Price, "Belief 'In' and Belief 'That,'" 19.

<sup>7</sup> See Kripke's arguments in "Lecture 2" against Theses 2-4 of the Cluster Theory in Saul A Kripke, *Naming and Necessity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001).

<sup>8</sup> I thank Professor Calvin Normore for this particularly helpful point.

Christian from unknowingly worshipping something that is not God but also provides a foundation for doctrinal and spiritual development. A correct conception of God leads one to the right object, and the more the conception deviates from the conventional conception, the more reason there is to call one's belief in God into doubt. For example, I believe in my mother. Although I have a different relationship with her than I do with God, my belief-in has all the important components. Suppose I say, "I believe in my mother. Even though she is often busy with her duties in the Oval Office, I appreciate that she makes time for me." The intuitive reaction would be, "are you sure you are talking about your mother?" The description I used, which indicated how I conceive of her, is incorrect. If I insist upon my claim, it seems that I do not understand who my mother is. I can still believe in her, but my belief-in is shallow, easily proven false, and misguided because of my improper conception of her. It would be equally, if not more concerning and nonsensical, if I said, "I believe in my mother, but I have no idea what she is like and I do not care." Likewise, the Christian believes that an improper conception of God deeply impacts the coherency of Christianity, argumentative power, and their personal relationship with God. In other words, in order to believe in God in the evaluative sense one must also believe certain things about God in the factual sense.<sup>9</sup> A correct conception of the Christian God consists in believing that (1) He exists and (2) He is triune (God eternally exists in three co-equal Persons: the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit). Thus, even as Christians become divided on complex doctrinal issues, a correct conception of God ensures that they have fundamental union in terms of their belief. This view also easily clarifies whether one believes in the *Christian* God; if one rejects (1) and/or (2) then that is evidence against the claim that the person believes in the Christian God.

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<sup>9</sup> Price, "Belief 'In' and Belief 'That'," 14.

However, since belief-in God is not reducible to a set of propositions, having a correct conception of God is necessary but not sufficient for belief-in God. Just because I believe that God exists and that He is triune does not mean I believe in him (e.g. the demons in James 2:19). The role of descriptive content in Christian belief is not that it picks out the right object for us to talk about but rather that it ensures we have a proper understanding of the object we claim to believe in. The difference between belief-in and belief-that seems to concern whether the type of belief in question is wholly reducible to propositions and the components involved in the belief (e.g. trust and a proper conception of the entity).

### **3. FLEW**

I interpret Flew's main argument in "Theology and Falsification: A Symposium" as stating that when the Christian is faced with what seems to be defeaters to their belief in God (namely the existence of evil), they qualify their belief in God in to the point where their belief statement seems to contradict other belief statements in their belief system. This makes Christianity appear internally contradictory because it cannot account for the existence of evil without contradiction. I think Flew does capture an intuitive response some may have when interacting with Christianity—especially in the context of a skeptical debate. This is illustrated by the Gardener Parable, where two explorers disagree about whether a gardener tends a clearing in a jungle. After conducting several tests that each turned out to be unable to prove the gardener's existence, the explorer who believes in the gardener's existence continues to qualify his belief that the gardener exists in the face of defeaters. He begins with belief-in the proposition that "some gardener must tend this plot" and qualifies his belief until he arrives at the proposition "there is a gardener, invisible, intangible, insensible to electric shocks, a gardener who has no scent and makes no sound, a gardener who comes secretly to look after the garden which he loves." To this, the skeptic explorer, who represents many

individuals' intuitive response, claims that the other explorer has qualified his belief so much that it seems he has contradicted his original statement that "some gardener must tend this plot."<sup>10</sup> The skeptic explorer claims, "how does what you call an invisible, intangible, eternally elusive gardener differ from an imaginary gardener or even from no gardener at all?" The believer-explorer qualifies rather than specifies his belief because as seen by the empirical tests the explorers conduct to determine the gardener's existence (e.g. an electric fence and bloodhounds); they make assumptions about what the gardener is like. After this, the believer-explorer revises them in light of the data from the investigations. This is a subtle dis-analogy to the Christian faith, where the Christian is not on a journey to find God—she at least has some basic knowledge concerning what He is like (e.g. statements (1) and (2) from Section 2). But for the sake of the argument I will concur that Christians are qualifying their belief.

To Flew, religious belief seems to be analogous to this phenomenon of qualification in the Parable, where Christians qualify their belief-that statements concerning God to the point where it seems like their belief-that statements concerning God are formed arbitrarily and contradict other belief-that statements in their system. Furthermore, Flew believes that, like the believer explorer's belief-that concerning the gardener, Christianity is irrational because its proponents seem to avoid seriously considering what seems to be counter-evidence for their belief-that statements concerning God. Instead, they qualify their belief that God exists in an attempt to maintain it in light of counter-evidence. Although Flew's argument seems to be compelling at first, a closer examination of Flew's assumptions indicates that he views religious belief as belief-that, not belief-in, an assumption that I argue overlooks what occurs when Christians make qualifications.

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<sup>10</sup> Antony Flew, R.M. Hare, and Basil Mitchell, "Theology and Falsification: A Symposium," in *The Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Basil Mitchell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), 1.



The reason why Flew believes Christianity is arbitrary and irrational is because he holds the assumption that Christians must be able to formulate a finite set of belief-that reasons at any time and that, in the face of what appears to be defeating evidence (the existence of evil), they must admit their belief to be wrong. Furthermore, instead of doing this, Flew assumes that Christians qualify their beliefs to the point where the propositions they hold seem to contradict their belief that God is good. Flew's assumption that religious belief is just belief-that is embedded in the Gardener Parable, which I will later show is a false analogy to religious belief. The believer explorer originally held the view that "some gardener must tend this plot" and continues to construct a finite set of propositions that he believes in, but the qualifications he made to his original set of belief-that statements is so severe that it appears to contradict his original claim that "some gardener must tend this plot."<sup>11</sup> If Flew is correct in thinking that religious belief was only belief-that, then religious belief would indeed be irrational assuming that objections to Christianity were, in fact, correct.

The example that Flew believes is analogous to the Gardener Parable is one where someone believes (that) the initial proposition (P) "God loves us as a father loves his children." When they see a child dying of inoperable cancer of the throat, they make the qualification to their original belief set and hold the additional belief, "God's love is 'not merely a human love'." Although the additional belief is compatible with the original assertion, when the skeptic asks, "what does this appropriately qualified love really guarantee against" if it allows such tremendous suffering? Flew believes that the Christian would then have to continue qualifying their claim until it seems to contradict their original belief that "God loves us as a father loves his children." Here we can see that from Flew's perspective, it seems

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<sup>11</sup> Flew, Hare, and Mitchell, "Theology and Falsification: A Symposium," 1.

the Christian lacks the many characteristics of belief-in and only holds a finite set of propositions to be true. If it were true that religious belief was simply belief-that, then Flew is correct in demonstrating that religious belief is irrational. However, as we evaluate Mitchell's argument from the perspective that religious belief is belief-in, we will find that Flew's argument mischaracterizes Christianity.

#### 4. MITCHELL

Mitchell's argument provides a better characterization of religious belief because he recognizes that belief-in and belief-that are both involved in Christian belief. According to Mitchell, Christians admit that suffering counts against their assertion that God loves humans, but they do not allow such evidence to count *decisively* against their assertion. This is because they are "committed by [their] faith to trust in God."<sup>12</sup> Here we can see that Mitchell assumes religious belief is not belief-that because of the component of trust. In fact, Mitchell describes religious belief as a "trial" because there is a tension the Christian must address between P (God loves us as a father loves his children) and the existence of suffering. However, it is precisely this trial that makes Christianity rational. Contrary to what Flew thinks, Christians do not ignore the seemingly defeating evidence against the propositions they hold, but because they trust God, they do not let such evidence successfully defeat their belief in him. Thus, to Mitchell, P is a significant article of faith. The Christian's belief in God, and more specifically the properties of belief-in, allow the Christian to reconcile the tension between the existence of evil and P. To Flew, however, Christians who hold such a proposition treat it as "vacuous formulae" without any bearing upon their life.<sup>13</sup> Whether or not P can be reconciled with the existence of evil hinges on whether religious belief is belief-in or belief-that.

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<sup>12</sup> Flew, Hare, and Mitchell, "Theology and Falsification: A Symposium," 5.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

## **5. THE STRANGER PARABLE AS AN ANALOGY TO RELIGIOUS BELIEF**

Now I intend to show that because religious belief is belief-in, several of Flew's claims are incorrect. In this section, I will respond to Flew's claims that Christians must be able to form a finite statement of belief-that statements at any time. I will also respond to his claim that Christians must admit their belief to be wrong in the face of seemingly defeating evidence. My response will include an explanation of what happens when Christians qualify their claims. Then, I will discuss how such qualifications are rational due to the nature of trust that a Christian has in God. After that, I will respond to Flew's claim that the qualifications Christians make are contradictory. I will appeal to Flew's 'human-centric' perspective of religious belief and the God-centered nature of Christianity to argue that we do not need to provide a satisfactory explanation for specific instances of suffering.

Mitchell's Stranger Parable illustrates various aspects of belief-in mentioned in this section and is an analogy to belief in God.

In time of war in an occupied country, a member of the resistance meets one-night a stranger who deeply impresses him. They spend that night together in conversation. The Stranger tells the partisan that he himself is on the side of the resistance—indeed that he is in command of it, and urges the partisan to have faith in him no matter what happens. The partisan is utterly convinced at that meeting of the Stranger's sincerity and constancy and undertakes to trust him.

They never meet in conditions of intimacy again. But sometimes the Stranger is seen helping members of the resistance, and the partisan is grateful and says to his friends, 'He is on our side.' Sometimes he is seen in the uniform of the police handing over patriots to the occupying power...the partisan still says, 'He is on our side.' He still believes that, in spite of appearances, the Stranger did not deceive him. Sometimes he asks the Stranger for help and receives it. He is ten thankful. Sometimes he asks and does not receive it. Then he says, 'the Stranger knows best.'...

The partisan of the parable does not allow anything to count decisively against the proposition ‘the Stranger is on our side.’ This is because he has committed himself to trust the Stranger. But he of course recognizes that the Stranger’s ambiguous behavior does count against what he believes about him. It is precisely this situation which constitutes the trial of his faith.<sup>14</sup>

As seen from the Parable, there is no finite set of belief-that claims the partisan can generate about the Stranger at any given moment not only because belief-in is non-reducible, but also because the partisan generates belief-that claims based on the stranger’s forthcoming actions. This is a product of trust and the prospective nature, or future-referencing nature, of belief-in mentioned in Section 2. The belief-that statements necessary for a correct conception of the Stranger are (Y) the Stranger is in command of the resistance and (Z) the Stranger is on the side of the resistance. Y and Z are not interchangeable since it is possible for the Stranger be a double agent, which makes Z false even if Y is true. These two propositions form the basis of a correct conception of the Stranger and the basis for further qualification. As stated in Section 2, one cannot believe in something or someone without having a conception of what it is. In this case, if the partisan believes in the Stranger, he will not only believe that Y and Z at a specific moment, but he will continue to believe that Y and Z. These two beliefs, combined with his trust in the Stranger, leads him to generate the belief-that claim “the Stranger knows best” (X) only after the Stranger is seen handing patriots over to the enemy (situation A), evidence against his belief in the Stranger. There would be no reason for the partisan to generate X without first experiencing situation A because until then, there was no evidence for  $\sim Z$ . But when situation A is evidence for  $\sim Z$ , the partisan then uses his belief in the Stranger (namely trust) and belief-that statements to develop a further belief-that statement to reconcile the tension between his belief-that Z and evidence for  $\sim Z$ . Because the partisan is able to provide further explanations for Z, the partisan does not

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<sup>14</sup> Flew, Hare, and Mitchell, “Theology and Falsification: A Symposium,” 5.

need to admit his belief to be wrong in the face of counterevidence as long as his qualifications are made on a rational basis.

Without the partisan's belief that Y and Z, he will be unable to generate X. If the partisan did not believe that the Stranger had the necessary intellectual and strategic abilities to lead a resistance, which is entailed by Y, or that the Stranger was, in fact, committed to the goal of the resistance, which is entailed by Z, there would be no reason for the partisan to generate X in response to situation A. Not only so, but without his belief in the Stranger—namely trust—he will not generate X. For even if the partisan believed that Y and Z were true, in the face of evidence for  $\sim Z$ , such as situation A, the partisan would most likely abandon his original belief-that statements if he did not trust and believe in the Stranger. Thus, certain foundational belief-that statements (for a correct conception) and belief-in are necessary for the generation of further belief-that statements in response to counterevidence.

Similarly, Christians also generate additional belief-that claims based on what they perceive as God's actions. When the Christian is faced with the situation of a child dying of inoperable cancer of the throat (situation B), the process of reconciling situation B with the Christian's trust in God and belief that P (the proposition that "God loves us as a father loves his children") would, for example, lead her to generate the belief that "God works in the midst of suffering to achieve a greater purpose." Without the belief that P and the Christian's belief in God, she would not be able to generate the additional belief-that statement. Also, like the partisan, the Christian's generation of the new belief-that statement is in response to situation B, or some other situation in that provided her with the evidence for  $\sim P$ . Since religious belief and the partisan's belief-in the Stranger is forward-looking, qualification is to be expected. The mere existence of counter evidence does not count decisively against belief-in God and

belief-that claims if further explanations can be given for why such counter evidence is not a defeater.

Now that I have given an account of the phenomena of qualification, I would like to focus on why such qualifications made in the face of counterevidence have a rational basis, which allows the Christian to maintain her belief that P. First, it is important to note that in the Stranger Parable and in Christianity, there is often evidence *for* belief-that statements as well. The Stranger sometimes helps the members of the resistance and sometimes the partisan receives the help he asks for. This part of the analogy is critical, since many Christians use experiences, facts, arguments, etc. to claim that there is evidence for God's existence, providence, and for P. Flew fails to consider this in his argument and assumes there is only evidence against P, as seen when he only mentioned instances of suffering. The Gardener Parable also does not mention any evidence for the Gardener's existence, presenting the explorer's belief that the Gardener exists as wholly untenable and irrational. In the Gardener Parable, the believer does not have any evidence for the gardener, whereas in the Stranger Parable and Christianity there is at least what is *plausibly* evidence (most notably, the life, death, and supposed resurrection of Jesus Christ, as well as presumed Messianic prophetic fulfillment), even if it is evidence that the non-believer does not accept or see as significant. Thus, the Christian's trust and foundational 'belief-that' statements are supplemented by evidence, which then guides her in generating qualifications. More research is needed to understand the justification necessary for initial belief-in, but that is beyond the scope of this paper. This justification does not only apply to belief in God, but also belief in friends, family, lovers, etc. There may be things about trusting that are unique to religious belief, but the issue of justification for trust and belief-in is not specific to Christians.

Although qualifications made on a rational basis show Flew's arguments that first, the Christian must formulate a finite set of belief-that statements at any time and, second, must admit her belief to be wrong in the face of counterevidence are incorrect, the unresolved objection of contradictory qualifications still seems to present an issue for the Christian. Since Flew does not clearly state what he takes the Christian's contradictory qualifications to be, I imagine that Flew thinks it contradictory for the Christian to hold P in the face of evil that she claims God detests. Perhaps something similar to the qualificatory claim (C) "God often takes advantage of evils and uses them for some greater good for our sake" is one thing Flew possibly takes to be contradictory with P. He might ask, "Is there a greater good than lack of human suffering, and how can God allow us to endure suffering out of love?" This is a "human-centric" view of religion. Both 'moral evils' (evil that is caused by humans) and 'natural evils' (evils with natural causes) fall under the umbrella of 'evil' and are the sources of human suffering.<sup>15</sup> I think C alludes to a broader claim that Christians often make—that they often do not know why God allows instances of suffering to occur. However, C, and the fact that Christians often cannot give an explanation for instances of suffering (i.e. reconcile P with evil), does not serve as proof that Christianity is inherently contradictory. For one, it shows that humans are what Christians believe they are—unable to fully grasp God's sovereign plan. In fact, the apparently contradictory claims, such as C, are accounted for in the Christian framework and are a necessary component of rational trust in God. This can be seen by comparing Flew's 'human-centric' view of religion and the 'God-centered' nature of Christianity.

While evil is and should be detestable to God and humans alike, it is important to understand that a comfortable life, free from suffering and evil, is not the ultimate good in Christianity. Christianity is not centered on

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<sup>15</sup> Marilyn Adams and Robert Adams, *The Problem of Evil* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 1.

humans and ways for us to minimize suffering in our lives. Rather, it concerns how we can have and maintain a relationship with God despite the evil in the world. Christianity is God-centered, meaning that even though “nothing could be more advantageous to us than the existence of God, if he is what Christians believe him to be,” we also value him for his own sake.<sup>16</sup> The Christian is not guaranteed a life of physical, mental, or emotional comfort through belief-in God. Instead, through belief in God, the Christian enters into a relationship with God in this life and for eternity. Suffering and a relationship with God, as well as suffering and P, are not incompatible. In fact, suffering is often viewed as a way that one’s relationship and belief-in God is strengthened. Since Christians value God for his own sake, they view a relationship with him as more important than the other aspects and experiences of human life, and this includes suffering. Because Flew mistakes religious belief to be assigning utmost importance to human comfort rather than God, it is understandable why evil and suffering appear to him to be blatantly contradictory with religious belief.

The general belief that a relationship with God is more important than human comfort, combined with the characteristics of trust, allow Christianity to be internally consistent despite the Christian’s inability to give an explanation for instances of suffering and claim that C. This is because the Christian is in a relationship with a fully autonomous entity, which means God’s actions are self-directed and thus bring uncertainties into the relationship due to our inability to fully comprehend his actions and reasons. If human beings were of the same intellectual level as God, then God would cease to be God. Victoria McGeer notes that trust is a sort of reliance that is marked essentially by recognition of the other’s personhood as a source of self-determined action and self-consciousness.<sup>17</sup> And with the autonomous personhood and far superior intellect that God

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<sup>16</sup> Price, “Belief ‘In’ and Belief ‘That’,” 26.

<sup>17</sup> Victoria McGeer, “Developing Trust,” *Philosophical Explorations* 5, no. 1 (2002): 34.



has, he is bound to do things that we fail to comprehend. Because of this, trust is also such that the ‘truster’ believes in the ‘trusted’ “despite challenges that might cause more ‘neutral’ individuals to be wary.”<sup>18</sup> In addition, since Christians understand that God, rather than a comfortable life, is of the utmost importance, their trust in God is less likely to be damaged when they experience suffering. Thus, the nature of trust and God are such that the Christian can claim C (God often takes advantage of evils and uses them for some greater good for our sake) despite not giving an explanation for instances of suffering. The magnitude of who God is cannot be fully understood by humans, hence the need for analogies such as Heavenly Father, Shepherd, and Redeemer that give us only a glimpse into God’s character. And if we cannot presume to fully know who God is, then it seems perfectly sensible to admit that we cannot fully know His plans either. God’s fully unknowable nature, as well as the faith He demands in response, creates a balance for an internally consistent belief framework.

## **6. THE OBJECTION OF THE ABUSIVE HUSBAND AND MY RESPONSE**

One objection to my argument would be to compare instances of suffering God allows humans to experience to a toxic relationship, such as spousal abuse. There are, it seems, some similarities between the two, but there are also significant disanalogies that ultimately prove the futility of pursuing this line of argument. Consider a scenario in which a husband regularly abuses his wife, and yet (due to unfortunate psychological conditioning caused by the husband’s abuse) the wife esteems her husband, trusts him, believes that “my husband is a good man” and “my husband has my best interests in mind,” and believes that her husband will continue to possess such properties. Furthermore, she believes that

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<sup>18</sup> McGeer, “Developing Trust,” 30.

the abuse serves to strengthen their marriage, their relationship, and her love for him. Every time she is abused, she qualifies her claims towards her view that her husband's abuse is for the greater good, and she sometimes admits that she cannot always provide an explanation for his abuse. The question then becomes how God's relationship to humans is different from the husband's relationship to the wife.

The most significant and fatal disanalogy between the objection and the Christian's relationship with God is that the husband is a human, which means we can use our understanding of human characteristics to conclude that the husband's abuse is not justified by or conducive to any greater good. As humans, we understand others based on our own reasons, rationale, motivations, etc. for pursuing actions. Thus, we know the limitations of human agents and what they are and are not able to accomplish through their actions. From our knowledge of human agents, we can conclude that abuse is never truly motivated by positive or virtuous intentions. It is always motivated by manipulative intentions, anger, hatred towards the victim, etc. Furthermore, we can conclude that abuse does not lead to any positive outcomes such as the ones the wife is conditioned to think. Even if it seems to the wife that her marriage is improving and her love for her husband is becoming stronger, psychological analyses show that what the wife feels is in fact not true—the perceived outcomes are just the effects of psychological manipulation, destructive coping mechanisms, etc. God, on the other hand, is largely beyond understanding and has infinitely more power and knowledge than human beings. Thus, as previously stated, we cannot fully understand God based on knowledge of human agents. Furthermore, we cannot claim that when God allows humans to suffer, his actions are not motivated by positive or virtuous intentions. Christians and non-Christians alike may notice that for many Christians, the sufferings they experience are conducive towards a stronger relationship with God and the development of positive virtues such as courage, kindness, compassion, etc.

In other words, suffering helps achieve or refine one of the most important goods from a Christian standpoint—a relationship with God. The ultimate good in the (secular) context of marriage is, loosely speaking, a good marriage. However, abuse is not conducive towards a good marriage unless by ‘good marriage’ one means a marriage laden with abuse, emotional turmoil, physical and mental suffering, and psychological destruction caused by one or both parties in the marriage. When the wife in the abusive marriage is presented with such a definition, it is unlikely that she would agree with it given her rationalization for her husband’s abuse. However, if God did in fact accomplish what Christians deem as best for humanity—reconciliation to a relationship with God (which was done, of course, through the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross)—then perhaps there is a satisfactory answer to why God allows evil to exist.

## 7. CONCLUSION

The distinction between belief-in and belief-that as a framework is important to properly understand Antony Flew and Basil Mitchell’s discussion in “Theology and Falsification: A Symposium.” Although seemingly plausible, Flew’s approach to the POE from a belief-that perspective is deeply flawed. The nuances in the belief-in framework better account for the complexities of religious belief. Such a perspective should be considered when moving forward in discussions about religious belief. Finally, it is important to note that I have aimed to demonstrate the *internal coherency* of Christianity in this paper, not whether this internal coherency translates into external plausibility. That is an issue for another realm of literature and scholars in an array of fields.

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