



# Divine Protection and Natural Harm: Theological Interpretations and the Challenge of Assigning Responsibility

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**Abstract.** The theological dilemma of thanking God for protection from natural harm, when God is often seen as the source of such harm, is a complex issue explored through various religious and philosophical lenses. Ancient narratives, such as the story of Sodom and the Great Flood, serve as foundational examples of divine retribution and protection. The analysis engages with theological perspectives like Christian determinism, John Hick's free will defense, and Irenaean soul-making theodicy, alongside philosophical critiques from figures like D.Z. Phillips and Paul Draper, who question the morality of divine intervention. Comparative insights are drawn from other religious traditions, including Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam, which often distance divine causation using concepts like karma and cosmic justice. Historical and modern case studies, such as Hurricane Katrina and the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, are examined to illustrate diverse interpretations and responses by religious communities. The study reveals that while various theological frameworks seek to reconcile divine protection with natural harm, significant tension persists, highlighting the ongoing challenge of justifying God's omnibenevolence in the face of widespread suffering. Ultimately, the unresolved nature of this issue underscores the complexities inherent in faith and theodicy across religious traditions.

**Keywords:** Theological Determinism, Divine Causation, Natural Evil, Comparative Religion, Christianity, Moral Justification

## 1 Introduction

It is believed that a wide range of ancient religions, from mythologies from Greece and Rome to diverse tribal faiths, emerged in reaction to a variety of natural occurrences, such as natural disasters. Disasters were thought to be brought by angry gods as a kind of retribution on humanity who were guilty. A priesthood was established to determine what was required and carry out the appeasement activities, as well as a variety of rites and sacrifices (O'Mathúna 2018). Something was needed to placate the gods. For instance, the sea deity Poseidon is credited for sending the first known tsunami in 479 BC as retaliation against the Persians for their siege of Potidaea, according to Herodotus.

In the Bible story of Sodom, it reflects a similar message. When God decided to eliminate the city of Sodom, He faced a dilemma: if He destroyed the entire city, then both the righteous and the wicked would be killed, which Abraham deemed unjust. Thus, God decided to spare only Lot and his family and annihilate the rest. But even while doing so, Lot's wife was accidentally killed and turned into a pillar of salt (Dílek, 2021). This raises a theological query: Is it reasonable to thank God for protection from some natural harm if He is the very source of the causation? If we are placed in the position of Lot or Abraham in this story of Sodom, is gratitude towards God still justified and logical?

To answer this fundamental question, this essay will first examine the definitions of two key terms. "Protection" means that God has chosen to let certain individuals survive the natural calamity, granting them the opportunity to live while leaving others perishing. In addition, "natural harm" refers to any harm that is not a result of human choices based on the free will granted by God. Controversies arose when defining whether God is the sole attributor to the natural harms.

On one hand, some theologians claim God to be the only author of natural evils. (ALEXANDER, pp 16). One representative of such thinking is Determinism. John Feinberg, for example, describes his theological determinist position as that view that "God's decree covers and controls all things" (2001, p. 504), while Paul Helm, another staunch theological determinist of the Calvinist variety, simply says that God's providence is "extended to all that He has created" (1993, p. 39). Thus, we see God controlling the weather, as we see in [Deuteronomy 11:17](#), and God catalyzing the devastation inflicted upon the city of Sodom. They argued that nothing happens without God's express will and purpose, and thus, even natural harm and suffering are part of His divine plan.

On the other hand, some Christian theists like John Hick claim that God never miraculously intervenes to cause every natural disasters in the world. So He is not the direct cause of such events. At most He can be said to be the remote cause of these events because the Bible proclaims that God holds all nature together, "For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities — all things were created through him and for him" ([Colossians 1:16-17](#)). He established the natural laws that govern the universe and the initial boundary conditions on which those laws operate.

In much the same way that God allows evil people to commit evil acts, God allows the earth to reflect the consequences sin has had on creation. [Romans 8:19-21](#) tells us, "The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God." The fall of humanity into sin had effects on everything, including the world we inhabit. Everything in creation is subject to "frustration" and "decay." St. Augustine would argue, The "Fall" disrupted the harmony of creation. After the "Fall", not only was human nature corrupted, but nature itself became subject to decay and disorder. Thus, sin is the ultimate cause of natural disasters just as it is the cause of death, disease, and suffering.

Now, both definition and explanation can work. Whether God actively caused the natural harm or not, the ultimate reason comes down to why God decided to let that happen.

The complexity behind this question is fundamentally intertwined with Theodicy—the problem of evil. This centuries-long conundrum has drawn focus on the existence of God and the justification for worshiping and thanking God. James 1:17 says that God wants us to learn to be grateful for everything He has given us. Therefore, to be thankful in this situation indicates that even if God causes suffering in the first place, His protection against natural harm is justifiable, logical, and blessed. Hence, this essay will deconstruct the logic behind the problem of natural evil in an attempt to reconcile the thank-worthy nature of God's exclusive protection with His permission of natural harm by proving that it is necessary and beneficial on both the individual level and mankind level, thereby validating the omnibenevolence of God.

A common challenge from those disillusioned with God is that natural harms usually come out as random incidents that sweep away both the virtuous and the sinful. From early on, Epicurus questioned the praiseworthiness of God, arguing that these events contradicted His all-loving and all-powerful nature. Similarly, Voltaire (1759) addressed catastrophes like the 1775 Lisbon earthquake in his book *Candide*, casting doubt on how an all-perfect God could allow such suffering. Just like how Abraham pleads for the lives of the righteous in Sodom, the traditional skepticism against the thank-worthiness of God stems from the difficulty of comprehending the widespread, seemingly random suffering with His attributes of omnibenevolence and omnipotence.

With the randomness and prevalence of natural harm in mind, this essay will respond to such challenges on both individual and mankind levels by showing that natural harm does not compromise God's all-perfect qualities. It is still reasonable to thank God for His protection.

## 2 Reciprocal Nature of Harm and Benefit

In order to prove the first part of the argument, this essay will explain why causing harm and giving protection from natural harm in tandem is beneficial on the individual level. Irenaeus argued under the soul-making Theodicy that God created humans imperfectly, and thus, humans are blessed with the potential for growth and development. The presence of evil and suffering in the world is being contemplated as an integral component of the soul-making process. Accordingly, this suggested that natural harms, despite the sufferings they have caused, serve as invaluable opportunities for individuals whom God protects to grow toward perfection and build their characters. Imagine you survived an earthquake that destroyed your village and your family. This experience, in turn, would stimulate a strong sense of responsibility within you to help your community rebuild, symbolizing one step forward in the soul-making process. Therefore, this world with natural harm sets the stage for spiritual growth, during which souls are taking shape to eventually display God-likeness.

C.S. Lewis further explained why natural harms benefit human development, arguing that pain and suffering from natural harms are God's wake-up call: God employs

mechanisms to evoke awareness of one's suppressed desire for a nurturing connection with God (Lewis Institute, 2022). In his book, *The Problem of Pain*, Lewis claimed, "We can ignore even pleasure. But pain insists upon being attended to. God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains: it is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world" (Lewis, 1940). Certainly, when times are too "good," it is very much common for individuals to inadvertently neglect spiritual connections with God. Church attendance dwindles, and bible reading wanes. However, when a tsunami happens, churches are full again. Those who survive then turn to pages of Scripture, begging God for help. It is the pain of near misses and surviving a natural disaster that brings one closer to God, proving it beneficial to individuals.

This draws an important observation on natural harm's impact in people religious belief. It is very much so common for one to lose hope when faced a tragedy that cannot be explained by anything else other than God. We ask, Why did God allow a tsunami to kill over 225,000 people in Asia? Why does God allow hurricanes to destroy the homes of thousands of people? However, what comes along with that questioning isn't the lost of belief and hope in God, but rather, the increase of religiosity and connection with God. In Jeanet Sinding Bentzen's study, she found that "individuals in districts with higher earthquake risk are more religious than those living in areas with lower earthquake risk" (Bentzen, et. al, 2019). People do not think that God made the earth shake, instead, they use their religion to deal with the situation. This trend is explained by the theory of religious coping. People use religion as a means to cope with adversity and uncertainty. Indeed, this further proves Lewis' argument that God allowed natural evil to happen as a means to wake up individuals and foster their sense of religiosity and connection with Him (Voltaire, 2003).

On the individual level, the fact that we are protected by God to survive from natural harm inherently means God has granted us the opportunity to enrich our souls, an opportunity not afforded to others. Therefore, it is reasonable and justified to thank God for his protection.

Philosophers like D.Z. Phillips (2015) and Michael Tooley (2019) have criticized the aforementioned analysis as inherently selfish, as it put forward an egocentric argument that one's growth is contingent on others' sacrifices. They questioned whether suffering can ever be excused by the divine motives behind it, positing that it is difficult to reconcile with the idea of a loving God, especially when it means other people's suffering is necessary for individual growth. For example, it is quite challenging to use the idea of "soul-making" to justify the COVID-19 pandemic, which caused indiscriminate sufferings that victimized billions of people.

Further intensifying this confutation is the idea that people often struggle to reconcile the meaning of suffering. For instance, Job was unable to grasp the purpose behind his devastation despite being protected by God. His debate with his friends shows his frustration and confusion, as he does not feel as though he has gained anything from this experience. Admittedly, on an individual level, people may be unable to fully understand God's thank-worthy nature in the face of natural harm.

Accordingly, skeptical theologians like Paul Draper (2010) emphasized the importance of a holistic interpretation because (i) individuals are mostly ignorant of the reasons for God allowing natural harms to exist, and (ii) from an epistemic perspective,

people are never capable of claiming that some evils exist for which God lacks sufficient justifications to permit them to happen. In particular, English theologian and author Joseph Butler (1878) argued that evils can be redeemed by the greater good they bring about – but people cannot prove or know because they do not fully comprehend the connections between all events and God himself. This is presented in the Bible story of Moses. Moses, a shepherd, encounters a bush that is on fire but not consumed by the flames. God reveals himself and told Moses that he has been chosen to reuse the Israelites in Egypt. When Moses asks what he should say to the Israelites if they ask who has sent him, God responds: “I AM WHO I AM. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: ‘I AM has sent me to you.’” (Exodus 3:14). Here, God responds with a declaration of divine self-existence and mystery. This name implies that God's nature and purpose transcend human understanding (Aquinas, et. al, 2020). Similarly, the ignorance of humans is why Job cannot understand God's intention of bringing the natural harm onto him, and it is also why even when people do not understand the reasons behind the natural harm and the protection from God, they should still thank Him (Alexander, et.al, 2021).

For those who follow such reasoning of skeptical Theodicy, the argument may well come to an end here as humans are believed to be too limited to fathom God. Consequently, they may be better off staying in good faith and thanking God regardless of the randomness of the natural harm (Draper, 2010).

On the other hand, some theologians attempted to understand and explain God's purpose in various ways on a greater level by examining its impact on the whole of humanity. Thus, this essay will move beyond *ex parte* analysis of individuals by looking into the bigger picture.

### 3 Individual vs. Social Harm

A more integral approach to proving the significance of God's protection from the natural harm He created was introduced by A.C. Ewing (1973) to substantiate God's thank-worthiness. Following G.E. Moore's famous principle of organic unities, Ewing explained that the value of a whole is not necessarily equal to the sum of the values of the parts taken separately. The overall significance of a whole is affected not only by its separate parts but also by the interrelationships and synergistic effects among these constituents. This principle leads to a corollary that is directly relevant to the problem of evil as it entails that the addition to a whole of a part, which is bad in itself, can actually increase the value of the whole. This means that the production of an evil part can be justified if it adds value that outweighs its own disvalue to the whole.

Noah's story is a perfect epitome of this principle. God created a flood that killed everyone except for Noah's family because He believed that humanity was sinful, and it was against His purpose of creating this world. The flood created a better world for future generations after killing all those wicked. In the same logic, the story of Joseph reflects the same idea that evil and suffering, while painful and wrong in themselves, can be part of a larger plan that leads to a greater good. Joseph's brothers' betrayal was an evil act, and Joseph's suffering was indeed quite random, but they set into motion a

chain of events that ultimately resulted in a greater good—the survival of many people during the famine, including his own family: “You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives” (Genesis 50:20).

While the “part” of killing the rest of humanity through the flood may be deemed evil, it adds value to the “whole,” making the world better. Similarly, Joseph’s personal suffering, though tragic in isolation, led to the greater good of saving countless lives. Therefore, from a utilitarian point of view, the fact that the “part” is ultimately beneficial and leads to outcomes that increase the overall utility of the world, then the “part”, despite being evil or sinful, is morally permissible and justified to exist (Van Wouderberg, 2021).

The utilitarian perspective here is underscored by the belief that suffering, though seemingly cruel in isolation, can be an essential component of producing a greater good. For example, the post-disaster recovery efforts of Hurricane Katrina, which caused massive destruction and displacement, spurred innovations in urban planning and disaster management not only in the U.S. but around the world. The city of New Orleans became a model for how communities can emerge from disaster stronger and more resilient, with improvements in public infrastructure and emergency preparedness (Tooley, 2021). This outcome demonstrates the possibility that some suffering is capable of generating greater societal good.

However, utilitarianism also faces significant challenges when applied to theodicy, particularly when trying to justify individual suffering for the sake of the greater good. Critics argue that utilitarianism, by focusing on aggregate well-being, may downplay the real, personal suffering experienced by individuals. For example, while it may be argued that the death and destruction caused by the flood in Noah’s time brought about a better world, it is difficult to reconcile this with the real anguish and suffering experienced by those who perished (Van Inwagen, 2004). The individual lives lost are not merely statistics to be subsumed under a “greater good,” but real people with intrinsic value. This raises the moral question: Is it truly justifiable to allow such immense suffering if only a select few benefit in the long run?

Utilitarianism struggles to address this tension. For instance, the pain experienced by Joseph was still deeply personal and it is difficult to weigh it against the greater good. In this context, philosophers like Bernard Williams have criticized utilitarianism for its “impersonal” nature, suggesting that it fails to account for the intrinsic worth of individuals and their experiences. Williams argues that utilitarianism, in its pursuit of the greater good, often neglects the importance of personal integrity and the moral significance of individual suffering (Sobrino, 2020).

Furthermore, utilitarianism in the context of natural harm must contend with the randomness and unpredictability of such events. Disasters do not discriminate based on moral worth; they affect the virtuous and the wicked alike. While the aftermath of such events may result in societal benefits, utilitarianism offers little solace to those who bear the brunt of the harm. Critics argue that this perspective, while pragmatic, overlooks the moral complexity of real-world suffering, where the immediate harm to individuals cannot be so easily justified by abstract future benefits (Plantinga, 2021).

This is analogous to how, in some utilitarian computations, personal pain may be accepted if it results in increased enjoyment for the group as a whole. But the challenge lies in reconciling this with the very real emotional and physical toll on those who suffer (Phillips, 2005). While utilitarianism might argue that the "whole" is ultimately improved through suffering, it can never fully justify the pain endured by individuals who may not see or benefit from the greater good (O'Mathúna, 2021).

Thus, from a utilitarian standpoint, the presence of the "part" is justified if it is believed that it is a necessary component of achieving a higher overall good, such as the moral advancement made possible by free will or the spiritual advantages of redemption, even though it is immoral or bad. Yet, the tension remains: while utilitarianism may offer a framework to justify God's thank-worthiness in the face of natural harm, it struggles to fully account for the depth of individual suffering that such harm entails (Burns, 2021).

Whilst Ewing emphasized the synergistic value of parts within the whole, Richard Swinburne (1998) and Alvin Plantinga delved deeper into the idea from a different approach that highlights the inevitability of evil in the quest for goodness. Swinburne posited that evil can be justified as a necessary component for the existence of the greater good. For example, pain and suffering are what make goods such as compassion and empathy exist. Although God has the capability to create a world without any evil and suffering, Swinburne argued that such creation would only violate the Principle of Honesty and that humans should not be "systematically deceived on important matters" (Swinburne, 1998). This idea echoes Thomas Aquinas' Natural Law theory, explaining that natural evil is an unavoidable effect of good actions. For instance, evil befalls air and water as a result of the perfection of the fire. It is an apt analogy for the destructive forces of earthquakes: although a natural disaster can wreak havoc, it helps maintain Earth's geological system. Fundamentally, the evils of natural harm are often inextricably related to their beneficial roles within the broader natural order in pursuing the greater good. Ergo, why would it not be justified to thank God for that? Comparably, Plantinga stressed the idea that "God could not have created a universe containing moral good, without creating one containing moral evil" (Plantinga 2004). Surely, if "any world with incarnation and atonement is a better world than any without it," then the best possible world we hope to live in contain evil and sin. Thus, a world in which sin, suffering, and evil exist could ultimately be more valuable because it allows for the redemption of humanity through acts such as Christ's incarnation and atonement. These redemptive acts—central to Christian theology—are only necessary because of the existence of evil and sin. Fundamentally, Swinburne and Plantinga focused on the necessity of allowing natural evils to foster moral virtues, which justified God's thank-worthiness for causing harm and giving protection (Ewing, 2021).

Essentially, on the whole mankind level, the evil part and the good whole are interdependent. Because individuals may have different interpretations of the impact of their sufferings, it is crucial to examine natural harm and God's exclusive protection from a broader perspective. Natural harm may be considered evil to individuals (Pargament, 1997). However, in God's eye, they either contribute to a greater good or cannot be separated from the good since they are a necessary part of the world He created. Therefore, when looking at the question from a bigger perspective, God should be thanked

for His protection and natural harms, no matter how sinful or random they may seem to the individuals.

#### **4 Difficulty in Assigning Responsibility to God**

The question of assigning responsibility for natural disasters to God is complex and varies significantly across religious traditions. While some Christian interpretations, particularly in the Old Testament, frame disasters as acts of divine punishment or testing, many other religious systems do not attribute natural harm directly to God or a deity (Butler, 2021). For instance, in Hinduism, disasters are often understood through the concept of karma, where harm is not seen as a result of divine intervention but as a consequence of past actions in the cosmic cycle of cause and effect. This impersonal force operates independently, making it difficult to view natural disasters as being directly caused by a deity (Ewing, 2021).

Buddhism similarly distances divine responsibility from natural calamities. Rooted in the understanding of suffering (*dukkha*) as inherent to existence, Buddhist teachings explain that natural disasters are part of the impermanent and ever-changing nature of the world. The focus is less on divine causation and more on accepting the reality of suffering as part of the human condition, further complicating the notion of assigning direct blame to a god or higher power (Sinding, 2019).

In Islam, while some may interpret disasters as tests of faith from Allah, the concept of "Qadr" (divine decree) highlights the belief that all events unfold according to God's plan. However, this does not imply that Allah directly causes harm to individuals (Swinburne, 2021). Instead, believers are encouraged to see disasters as part of life's trials, with an emphasis on submission to divine will while taking practical steps such as charity and support for those affected (Geach, 2021).

Even within Christianity, the New Testament tends to shift away from the Old Testament's direct attribution of harm to God, focusing instead on themes of compassion, resilience, and communal responsibility in times of crisis. For example, following the devastation of Hurricane Katrina, many Christian communities focused on relief efforts and viewed God's role as one of providing strength and healing rather than directly causing the disaster (Freelin, 2022).

These diverse religious perspectives illustrate that while natural harm may be part of divine or cosmic frameworks, it is not universally seen as the direct responsibility of a deity. Instead, concepts like karma, cosmic justice, and divine providence complicate the simplistic view of God as the cause of disasters. As a result, many religious communities focus on how believers respond to such events, rather than assigning blame to God for their occurrence.

#### **5 Conclusion**

The answer to the question of God's thank-worthiness follows the proof of the benefits from dual perspectives – individual and mankind levels. On an individual level, God's



protection granted an exclusive opportunity for soul enrichment, making it reasonable and justified for people to thank God. On mankind's level, evil can be necessary for bringing about greater good from a broader view – protecting an individual and destroying others is a legitimate way for God to create a better world. As such, God is omnibenevolent and thank-worthy for its protection despite its cause of natural harm.

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