

The *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* and the Problem of Evil

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Abstract

The problem of evil is of significant concern to theologians and to philosophers of religion. Despite the extensive discussion that this problem has received in various Anglo-American philosophical circles, relatively little attention has been paid to the theodical insights specifically of the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa* (c. 9th-10th century CE). In this article, I seek to address this lacuna by highlighting certain theological insights within the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa* that offer explanations for the existence of suffering. I also draw upon these insights in order to formulate a response to the evidential problem of evil. Although I do not seek to construct a comprehensive theodicy with these textual materials, I do highlight how the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa* can address certain dimensions of the evidential problem for evil, and note some pathways for further inquiry into the theodical insights of the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa*.

Keywords: *Bhāgavatapurāṇa*, Problem of Evil, Theodicy, Vaiṣṇavism

Introduction

The problem of evil is a perennial concern within the disciplines of theology and the philosophy of religion. One version of this argument can be laid out as follows:

1. God, a supremely personal being, is conceived of as a being who is omnipotent, omnibenevolent, and omniscient (Premise).
2. An omnipotent being has the ability to prevent all evil (Premise).
3. An omnibenevolent being wants to prevent all evil (Premise).
4. An omniscient being knows how evil can come into existence and how it can be prevented (Premise).
5. A being that a) has the ability to prevent evil, b) wants to prevent evil, and c) knows how evil can be prevented, would indeed prevent evil (From 2-4).
6. But evil does exist (Premise).
7. So, an omnibenevolent, omnibenevolent, and omniscient being must not exist (From 5 and 6).

Conclusion: Therefore, God must not exist (From 1 and 7).

Theologians and philosophers have attempted to defend God's omnipotence, omnibenevolence, and omniscience in the light of the evil that is palpably present in the world by presenting a theodicy,¹ which can be defined as "an attempt to identify God's morally sufficient reasons or purposes for allowing evil²" (Meister and Moser 2017, p.4). If, however, the theodocist argues that the existence of evil does indeed serve a beneficial purpose, even if this purpose is not presently accessible to us with cognitive transparency, then evil ceases to be a logical refutation of the existence of God. In that case, the fifth premise would have to be reformulated as "A being that a) has the ability to prevent evil, b) wants to prevent evil, and c)

knows how evil can be prevented, would indeed prevent evil, but this being has some soteriologically-shaped reasons for allowing this evil.” Consequently, the above argument is invalid and no longer undermines the existence of a supremely personal God.

Within Anglo-American analytic philosophical circles, philosophers and theologians have put forth various responses to the problem of evil. It is beyond the scope of this article to describe these in extensive depth; however, I will mention a few influential ones. The first of such responses to the problem of evil is not, technically speaking, a theodicy, but a “defense,” which aims to demonstrate that there is no logical inconsistency in the co-existence of evil and a supremely personal God, without necessarily offering “plausible positive reasons for the existence of evil within a theistic universe” (Peterson 1998, p.33). This specific defense is known as the “Free Will Defense,” and it was famously articulated in Alvin Plantinga’s work *God, Freedom, and Evil* (Plantinga 1974). The Free Will Defense is believed to have refuted the *logical* problem of evil, which attempts to illustrate the logical inconsistency of the co-existence of evil and a supremely personal God. However, the *evidential* problem of evil still challenges the existence of a supremely personal God. The evidential argument from evil asserts that the existence of dysteleological or “gratuitous” evil (which is a horrific act that produces suffering, such as a fawn’s painful immolation in a burning forest) undermines the God’s existence, unless the theodocist can vindicate God from the charge of gratuitous evil by providing a plausible and morally defensible reason for God’s production of suffering (Rowe 1979, pp.336-338).³

One theodicy formulated against the evidential argument of evil is known as Skeptical Theism. The Skeptical Theist argues that we cannot rationally support disbelief in God on the basis of seemingly gratuitous evil, since, such evil *can* indeed serve as a greater good that we are unable to cognitively access given our finite epistemic reach (Wykstra 1984, pp.84-91). The

Skeptical Theist does not attempt to speculate upon God's motivations for allowing evil to exist. Thus, it can be considered a "minimalist theodicy," "for it does not attempt to explain God's intentions behind generating suffering and how such intentions are conducive for the greater good" (Wetzel 1989, p.4).

However, the philosopher and theologian John Hick has put forth a "speculative theodicy," which is a theodicy that attempts to speculate upon God's motivations for allowing evil to exist (Wetzel 1989, p.4). This speculative theodicy is known as the "soul-making theodicy," and according to it, humans are created at an epistemic distance from God (Hick 2010, p.281) and must "gradually become children of God through their own moral and spiritual choices" (Hick 2001, p.275). Hick also asserts that "a world in which there can be no pain or suffering would also be one in which there can be no moral choices and hence no possibility of moral growth and development" (Hick 2001, p.275). Therefore, Hick concludes that the world must provide humans with challenges in order for them to develop the moral character necessary to become a child of God (Hick 2001, p.275). In Hick's theodical framework, evil thus becomes reconfigured into a character-shaping mechanism that enables selves to obtain the purity that is needed to develop a relationship with God.

Within Hindu thought, there have also been attempts to explain the existence of suffering in this world (see Doniger 1980; Herman 1993; also see Schweig 2016 and Maharaj 2018 for recent Hindu responses to the problem of evil), although these responses to evil have not been targeted toward the problem of evil as it is formulated in Anglo-American analytic philosophical circles.⁴ One popular Hindu response to the existence of suffering or the apparently uneven distribution of pleasure and pain is to invoke the existence of *karmic* mechanisms that

commensurately administer rewards and punishments to individuals in accordance with the moral quality of their actions.⁵ However, there is one other response that is worth noting as well.

In his book chapter “Ethics: ‘May Calamities Befall Us at Every Step’ The Bhāgavata’s Response to the Problem of Evil” Gopal Gupta explains that according to the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa*⁶ (c. 9th to 10th century CE) (henceforth *BhP*), one explanation for the existence of suffering is that God sometimes produces suffering for God’s devotees as an expression of grace (Gupta 2013, pp.71-73).

In this paper, I build upon Gupta’s discussion of why God produces suffering for devotees and describe additional theological motifs contained within the *BhP* that are pertinent to the problem of evil. My aim in doing so is to illustrate how the *BhP*’s various theological motifs contain features of a soul-making theodicy as well as Skeptical Theism that can be utilized in order to formulate a response against the evidential problem of evil.

However, I realize that it was not the intent of the author of the *BhP* to respond to the evidential problem of evil *per se*. Hence, there is the question of whether or not one can utilize the theological resources of the *BhP* to formulate a response to this problem in the first place. I grant that it is problematic to a) attempt to reconstruct a theodicy based off the *BhP* and to claim that this is the definitive theodicy that the author intended to put forth or to b) read certain problems (like the contemporary problem of evil mentioned earlier) into the text that the author did not have in mind. However, in this paper I do not attempt to do a) or b). Rather, I will utilize the *BhP*’s theological motifs as the materials by which I fashion a response to the evidential problem of evil, with the awareness that I draw upon these theological resources in ways that that author may not have had in mind but which are nevertheless pertinent to the discussion at hand.

I should also note that this response is not intended to be a full-fledged theodicy. The *BhP* contains various doctrines such as reincarnation and a *karman* doctrine⁷ that could be utilized in order to develop a comprehensive theodicy that addresses the existence of evil on a number of fronts. Yet, developing such a theodicy would require far more space than what I am allotted here. Thus, I will restrict my focus to but a few motifs encountered in the *BhP*.

Nevertheless, I will mention that according to the *BhP*, the *karmic* residues of devotees are destroyed (*BhP* 11.14.19; p.1992). Moreover, various verses within the *BhP* describe how it is God who personally orchestrates instances of suffering for God's devotees. For instance, *BhP* 10.88.8⁸ states, "I [God] gradually remove the wealth of a person whom I favor. From this [removal of wealth], that person's relatives abandon the wealthless individual, and this individual becomes even further distressed." As this verse indicates, God personally makes arrangements for a devotee's life when this devotee is favored by God. As *BhP* 10.88.9, indicates, this is so that this devotee will seek out other devotees of God and become more devoted to God (p.1827). Moreover, *BhP* verses 1.9.15-16 imply that the tribulations experienced by the Pāṇḍavas (Arjuna, Bhīma, Yudhiṣṭhira, Nakula, and Sahadeva), who are God's devotees, were part of God's plan (p.76). Additional verses such as *BhP* 1.6.9-10 indicate that God personally causes tragic events in the life of the devotees (p.51). The various reasons God might have for causing suffering will be explained later in this paper. For now, it suffices to say that the various instances of evil that I outline are not necessarily *karmic* consequences – the *BhP* indicates that on occasion, God intervenes in the life of the devotees in order to personally orchestrate instances of evil (that God's omnipotence encompasses God's sovereignty over *karmic* mechanisms will be explained shortly).⁹

Before proceeding with my theodical exercise, I will first briefly explain the *BhP*'s importance in wider socio-religious milieus. The *BhP* is one of the Purāṇas, a category of Hindu sacred texts that are primarily concerned with narrating mythological stories and putatively historical events (Smith 2016, p.349). The *BhP* in particular places emphasis on the worship of Kṛṣṇa, whom *BhP* 1.3.28 regards as the original form of God's highest personal feature (p.29). Indeed, according to the *BhP*, developing one-pointed devotion toward Kṛṣṇa is viewed as the highest goal one can obtain (p.18). Furthermore, such devotion should be continuously performed without any ulterior motive, and one seeking to develop this devotion should refrain from satisfying their senses with worldly pleasures beyond what is essential for sustaining their life (*BhP* 1.2.6; *BhP* 1.2.10; pp.17-18). Thus, it can be implied that the attainment of such devotion requires a certain purity of character.

Moreover, it is important to note that the *BhP* conceptualizes Kṛṣṇa as the supremely omniscient, omnibenevolent, and omnipotent personal God. This is elaborated upon in (Gupta 2020), but I will also briefly provide some scriptural references for this claim here in this paper. Kṛṣṇa's omniscience is described in *BhP* 6.8.33,¹⁰ which explicitly states that Kṛṣṇa has knowledge of everything (*sarva-jñā*). Kṛṣṇa's omnibenevolence is suggested by several verses in the *BhP*. For instance, *BhP* 8.3.17¹¹ states that God is *bhūri-karuṇā*, meaning the one whose compassion (*karuṇā*) is great (*bhūri*). *BhP* 10.87.22¹² describes Kṛṣṇa as a benefactor (*hita*), dear (*priya*), and the very self (*ātman*) for a living being. *BhP* 7.1.1¹³ adds that God is a self's well-wisher (*suhṛd*) and is equal to all living beings (*sama*). Finally, Kṛṣṇa's omnipotence is implied by various *BhP* verses. *BhP* 8.3.9¹⁴ describes Kṛṣṇa as *ananta-śakti*, or the one whose power is unlimited. Moreover, several verses throughout the *BhP* such as 10.3.19¹⁵ state that the

production, preservation, and destruction of the world (*janma-sthiti-samyama*) occur because of God, thus indicating God's complete sovereignty over the world.

It is also important to note that according to the *BhP*, Kṛṣṇa has sovereignty over *karmic* mechanisms. For instance, *BhP* 2.5.21¹⁶ states, “desiring to expand himself, God, the controller of *māyā*, by his own will, accepted things obtained in the self, i.e. time, *karman*, and one's own nature, by God's own *māyā*.” This verse indicates God's voluntary acceptance of the processes of *karman* and thus illustrates God's command over them. Furthermore, *BhP* 2.5.14¹⁷ states that *karman* is not something other than or beyond God. Lastly, *BhP* 2.10.12¹⁸ states that the *karmic* mechanisms exist because of God's support (*yad-anugrahata*) also asserts that the *karmic* mechanisms would cease to exist if God were to abandon (*yad-upekṣā*) them, thus illustrating that they require God's constant ontological support. For these reasons, I argue that it is reasonable for God to be able to suspend the operations of *karmic* mechanisms for the devotees, whose *karmic* residues have been destroyed on account of their devotion to Kṛṣṇa, as previously mentioned.¹⁹

This particular conceptualization of God as a perfect being is highly significant because it is presupposed in the previously formulated problem of evil. Thus, I argue that the theodical insights of the *BhP* are pertinent to this particular formulation of the problem of evil. I also argue that other religious traditions that adhere to a similar conception of God (i.e. Christianity) can reflect upon and engage with some of the theodical insights that I will now begin to describe.

The Benefits Produced By Suffering Part 1

According to the *BhP*, one theological justification for God’s production of evil is that such evil produces a greater good for the devotee that outweighs their suffering. One narrative in chapter 23 of book 11 of the *BhP* illustrates this motif. As the narrative states, there was once a twice-born (*dvija*) (refers to a *vaiśya*, *kṣatriya*, or *brāhmaṇa*—the higher classes within the traditional fourfold Hindu social hierarchy) who was greedy and angry (*BhP* 11.23.6; p.2061). *BhP* 11.23.7 explains that this individual did not greet the relatives who visited his home, nor did he suitably satisfy his own desires (p.2061). As a result, the *dvija*’s sons and relatives, wife, daughters and servants were despondent and did not act pleasingly towards him (*BhP* 11.23.8; p.2061). Moreover, the five gods entitled to receive sacrifices became angry with him (*BhP* 11.23.9; p.2061). Consequently, his wealth became depleted (*BhP* 11.23.10; pp.2061-2062). As if this were not enough, relatives and thieves seized some of his wealth, and some of his other wealth was taken away by destiny, by time, as well by earthly rulers (*BhP* 11.23.11; p.2062). Having thus lost all of his wealth, the *dvija* received insurmountable anxiety (*BhP* 11.23.12; p.2062).

However, as a result of his suffering, the *dvija* then learned several lessons that developed his moral character. He learned that wealth never brings happiness (*BhP* 11.23.15; p.2062) and that even a tiny amount of greed destroys the pure fame that is enjoyed by the famous and also destroys the praiseworthy qualities of those endowed with such qualities (*BhP* 11.23.16; p.2061). He also learned that there are fifteen undesirable qualities such as violence, anger, and lust that are rooted in wealth (*BhP* 11.23.18-19; p.2062).

The *dvija* also learned that it is God who had brought about his unfortunate condition. He states in *BhP* 11.23.28,²⁰ “certainly God, comprising all the gods, is satisfied with me. Through God, I was led to this condition and to disgust, which is the boat for the self.” Moreover, the

dvija became a peaceful, hermetic beggar after untying the knots within his heart (*BhP* 11.23.31; p.2064). Ultimately, the beggar decided to devote himself entirely to God. In *BhP* 11.23.58²¹ he states, “having taken on this devotion for [God], which is presided over by the most ancient great sages, I will cross ignorance, the boundary of which is difficult to reach the end of, by the service to the feet of [Kṛṣṇa] alone.”

Thus, from this narrative we can identify two types of benefits the *dvija* obtained from his suffering: 1) positive development of moral character, and 2) an intensification of devotion toward God.

Additional verses within the *BhP* also describe the spiritual benefit that an individual receives from experiencing certain types of suffering. For instance, *BhP* 10.27.15-16²² highlight the morally reformatory dimensions of God’s removal of a devotee’s wealth and prestige. These verses state: “O Indra, desiring to favor you (*anugṛhṇatā*), I [Kṛṣṇa] stopped your sacrifice so that you, always greatly intoxicated by your wealth, could continually remember me. One who is blind through the madness of power and wealth cannot see me [Kṛṣṇa] with a stick [of adversity] in my hand, and I cause a person whom I desire to favor (*anugraha*) to fall from prosperity.” The context of this verse is as follows. The people of Vṛndāvana used to perform regular sacrifices to the god Indra. As they were about to perform one such sacrifice, Kṛṣṇa persuaded them to perform a sacrifice instead for the cows, the *brāhmaṇas*, and the Govardhana hill (*BhP* 10.24.25; p.1414). Because Indra’s sacrifice was halted, Indra became furious and unleashed heavy rainfall upon Vṛndāvana. Kṛṣṇa protected the inhabitants of Vṛndāvana from this rainfall by lifting up Govardhana hill and shielding them underneath it. After Indra thus failed to harm the villagers, he met with Kṛṣṇa in a solitary location, and Kṛṣṇa spoke these words to him.

These two verses are highly significant because they illustrate the motif that an individual's power and wealth can make them spiritually blind and thus make them unable to submit themselves to God. Kṛṣṇa is aware that Indra's power and wealth can cause Indra to deviate from the path towards devotional love. Therefore, Kṛṣṇa benevolently intervened in the life of Indra by humbling him in the process of preventing a sacrifice to Indra. In this way, Kṛṣṇa taught Indra a lesson and caused Indra to submit himself before him, as we see in verse 10.27.13,²³ wherein Indra tells Kṛṣṇa "I have come to you as my shelter," thus illustrating the spiritually therapeutic efficacy of Kṛṣṇa's obstruction of Indra's power through the prevention of his sacrifice. Hence, this brief narrative also reinforces 1) by illustrating how the loss of one's power and prestige can enable them to develop the humility necessary to submit oneself to God.

The Benefits Produced by Suffering Part 2

However, the narratives that we have seen so far concern relatively minor evils, and they do not address the horrific evils explicitly mentioned by proponents of the evidential problem of evil. For this reason, I now turn to another narrative within the *BhP* that does illustrate how even horrendous evils can produce greater goods. To understand this particular narrative, it is first important to understand the events of the *Mahābhārata* (c. 400 BCE – 400 CE). In the *Mahābhārata*, there is a great fratricidal war between the Pāṇḍavas and their relatives, the Kurus, that takes place on the battlefield of Kurukṣetra. This battle ends with but a few survivors, among whom are the five Pāṇḍavas, Draupadī (the wife of the Pāṇḍavas), and Aśvatthāmā, who is the son of the Pāṇḍavas' military teacher Drona. During the course of this battle, Aśvatthāmā murdered the remaining sons of the Pāṇḍavas in the middle of the night. What the Pāṇḍavas and Draupadī had to experience is certainly nothing short of a horrendous evil.

Yet, according to the *BhP*, there is even more to this story. After Aśvatthāmā performed his heinous deed of killing the Pāṇḍavas' sons, he was pursued by Arjuna, who intended to behead him for his crimes (*BhP* 1.7.16-17; pp.57-58). While being pursued, Aśvatthāmā launched a powerful weapon against Arjuna (*BhP* 1.7.19-21; pp.58-59). Arjuna counteracted this weapon with one of his own and arrested Aśvatthāmā (*BhP* 1.7.29-34; p.60). Kṛṣṇa indicates that it would have been permissible for Arjuna to kill Aśvatthāmā as a punishment for his misdeeds (*BhP* 1.7.37; p.61). However, Arjuna allowed Draupadī to decide what to do with the murderer of her children (*BhP* 1.7.41; p.61).

Draupadī, though having suffered greatly due to Aśvatthāmā's actions, decided to forgive him and spare his life (*BhP* 1.7.43; p.61). Her reasoning for this verdict is explained in *BhP* 1.7.47,²⁴ where she states: "do not make [Aśvatthāmā's mother] cry, just as I, who have lost my children, cry constantly." Draupadī's comment is significant because it reveals how horrific suffering can contribute toward one's moral development. In this context, it is clear that Draupadī's loss of her sons affected her greatly. This suffering was so intense in fact, that Draupadī would not wish anyone else to experience this same suffering for themselves. Hence, the loss of her sons enabled Draupadī to become more sensitive to the suffering (or potential suffering) of others, and this sensitivity in turn gave rise to compassion. Notably, the motif that suffering enables individuals to develop a sensitivity to the suffering of others is described elsewhere in the *BhP* as well. For instance, *BhP* 10.10.14²⁵ states, "just as a person whose body is pierced by thorns does not desire that pain for an animal, likewise, a person who has not been pierced by thorns has not understood how such pain is felt equally by others," further emphasizing the motif that the experience of suffering makes one more empathic towards others.

Thus, the narrative of Draupadī illustrates how even horrific suffering can produce

greater good, which in this case, is the development of one's character through acquiring a remarkable degree of compassion.

The Happiness of a Preeminent Devotee

It is also important to note that according to the *BhP*, the happiness a preeminent devotee experiences in their relationship with God outweighs even horrendous forms of worldly suffering. This motif is perhaps best illustrated by *BhP* 1.8.25,²⁶ which states: “O teacher of the universe [Kṛṣṇa], may there continually be calamities (*vipada*) everywhere. In those calamities, there may be a vision (*darśana*) of you [Kṛṣṇa], because of which we would never have to see worldly existence again.” The speaker of this verse is Kuntī, the mother of the Pāṇḍavas and aunt of Kṛṣṇa. In the context of the *Mahābhārata*, Kṛṣṇa personally met the Pāṇḍavas several times during their periods of struggle. Therefore, Kuntī prays to be able to experience more difficulties so that Kṛṣṇa would personally come before her again.

Yet, it is crucial to note that the sufferings that Kuntī and her family experienced were neither mild disturbances nor petty inconveniences. In addition to the battle of Kurukṣetra, there were various attempts made to assassinate Kuntī and her family throughout their lives, and to make matters worse, these attempts were made by the very relatives of Kuntī and her children.

However, the fact that Kuntī undergoes these horrid experiences only to desire more of them if they lead her to see Kṛṣṇa, is very telling. This fact implies that the pleasure a devotee such as Kuntī experiences by seeing God is so immense that even the types of evil mentioned above would be welcome if they can provide an opportunity to see God. This is a crucial point to note because it illustrates that there is an immeasurable good that awaits a devotee of God who

develops and cultivates their relationship with God, namely, the happiness experiencing in one's relationship with God.

Evil From a God's Eye Perspective

One further point to note is that the *BhP* also illustrates that certain events, though apparently cruel to our eyes, are in fact conducive toward a greater good when viewed from a God's eye perspective. One such event is the battle of Kurukṣetra. Some scholars have noted that this event challenge's Kṛṣṇa's omnibenevolence since Kṛṣṇa participated in this battle as Arjuna's charioteer and is described in the *Mahābhārata* as being indifferent toward the war, thus indicating that he intentionally neglected preventing the war (Doniger 1980, pp.259-261; Sharma 2020).

However, *BhP* 1.9.39 offers an explanation that justifies Kṛṣṇa's participation within the war and upholds his omnibenevolence despite his failing to prevent the war. *BhP* 1.9.39²⁷ states that the combatants who were killed on the battlefield attained their true spiritual form (*svarūpa*) after viewing Kṛṣṇa. This claim is significant because within the conceptual framework of the *BhP*, the self is not to be identified with the physical body but instead with an immaterial spiritual self whose identity persists beyond the dissolution of the physical body. Moreover, the attainment of liberation from physical existence is also concurrent with the realization of one's *svarūpa*, as verses such as *BhP* 4.23.18²⁸ imply. Thus, the *BhP* indicates that the warriors who died on the battlefield of Kurukṣetra were liberated and no longer subject to repeated births and deaths within worldly existence. Hence, from a God's eye point of view, the battle of Kurukṣetra produced a good that is not perceivable to ordinary eyes or to human reasoning, namely, the

wide-scale liberation of the war's participants on account of seeing Kṛṣṇa. This incident reveals that we are not always in an epistemic position to determine what is beneficial or detrimental for selves – a state of affairs that appears to us to be horrid may in fact, prove to be beneficial in ways that are not apparent to us, given our limited cognitive capabilities and epistemic reach.

Putting it All Together

Thus far, I have presented various motifs within the *BhP* that can be drawn upon in order to respond to the evidential problem of evil. Now, what remains to be done is to synthesize these motifs into a coherent theodical response. I will begin by taking stock of what I have outlined thus far. First, the *BhP* describes that suffering can produce greater goods, such as 1) the positive development of moral character, and 2) the intensification of one's love for God. Moreover, the *BhP* identifies how these benefits can be produced through both horrendous and non-horrendous instances of evil. The *BhP* also indicates that developing one's love for God can produce a happiness which is an unexcelled good that trivializes even the most tragic of evils. Finally, the *BhP* demonstrates that apparently horrific events can be benevolently re-imagined when viewed from a God's eye perspective.

Bearing these points in mind, the following response to the evidential problem of evil can be formulated as follows. One possible explanation for suffering is that it reforms one's character or enables one to deepen their devotion to God. In this case, suffering produces a greater good because it brings one closer to the highest good of experiencing a loving relationship with God. This response is similar to Hick's soul-making theodicy. However, there is still some puzzlement as to certain cases of suffering. For instance, while we may imagine how certain horrific evils

can produce greater good (such as the loss of a child, which is an instance of evil similar to what Draupadī endured), it is difficult to see how other instances of evil could produce a greater good. Rowe's analogy of the fawn who becomes immolated in a forest fire is one such instance. Here, a Skeptical Theist response could be given – given our finite epistemic reach, we are in no position to determine what goods could obtain by the fawn's burning, nor are we in any position to deny that such goods could indeed obtain. Yet, given the possibility that the fawn's burning could indeed serve some purpose that is beneficial in the grand scheme of things, the theist is justified to conclude that God does indeed have some benevolent purpose in allowing this fawn to suffer.

However, Rowe has objected to the above line of reasoning (when employed by Skeptical Theists who do not draw upon the *BhP*) by arguing that the theodist's failure to indicate justifiable goods that would emerge from God's production of evil and *are* within our intellectual grasp significantly lowers the likelihood that justifiable goods that *are not* within our epistemic access exist (Rowe 1996, p.282).

The theodist who draws upon the *BhP* can respond to this objection by noting that the *BhP* does indeed enable them to indicate justifiable goods that emerge from God's production of evil (such as those mentioned above), and thus, there is a good likelihood that the goods that are not within our epistemic access do exist.

At this point in the dialectic exchange, the proponent of the problem of evil can point out that the theodist who draws on the *BhP* can only identify plausible justifiable goods that result from God's production of evil in certain cases, namely, in the case of adult human agents who do not die before they are able to realize the goods that obtain from their suffering. However, this proponent can note that there are other instances of suffering that are not relevantly similar to

such instances of suffering, such as the case of the burning fawn or the premature death of a child, neither of which concern an adult human agent that lives through their suffering and realizes the good that obtains due to it.

I would argue that the theodist who draws upon the *BhP* is not without an answer to such instances of suffering. However, in order to provide such an answer, the theodist would have to avail themselves of other pertinent theodical resources contained within the *BhP*, such as its *karman* doctrine or reincarnation. However, as I have mentioned previously, it is beyond the scope of this paper to analyze the *BhP*'s *karman* doctrine.

Thus, a further exploration of the *BhP* would be required in order to construct a full-fledged theodicy that addresses all instances of evil that we witness. Nevertheless, I believe that I have demonstrated that the *BhP* has the theodical resources needed to address certain aspects of the evidential problem of evil and that these resources are worth taking into account when considering how Hindu thought can contribute to the contemporary discussions pertaining to the problem of evil.

Conclusion

Thus, according to the *BhP*, there are numerous spiritually reformatory dimensions of God's production of suffering for some of God's devotees. Such suffering can enable devotees to develop their moral character and intensify their devotion to God, which can in turn lead to the immeasurable good of the happiness experienced in one's relationship with God. These abovementioned benefits are highly significant because they challenge the notion of "evil" and impel us to re-envision "evil" in the light of its potential spiritually reformatory purposes. As

Richard Swinburne notes, one of the points to bear in mind when addressing the problem of evil is that individuals can have a narrowly construed idea of what evil is. They often think that “good” consists of sensory pleasure and that “bad” consists of sensory pain (Swinburne 2007, p.241). However, from a teleologically structured theocentric perspective, such definitions of “good” and “bad” are superficially construed and fail to capture the spiritual benefits that suffering can bring.

Moreover, the *BhP* illustrates that from a God’s eye perspective, horrific evils may serve a beneficial purpose that we are unaware of with our limited epistemic reach. Hence, there is reason to think that certain horrific evils that *we* cannot justify do have a good justification on the part of God. Nevertheless, a further investigation into the *BhP* would be required in order to account for certain forms of suffering, an explanation of which would bolster the thesis that all instances of evil produce a greater good, even if we cannot cognitively access knowledge of such a good.

Finally, it is worth re-emphasizing, if only briefly, that certain theodical insights I have outlined in this paper resonate with other religious traditions and can be drawn upon in comparative theodical exchanges between Hinduism and other such traditions. However, it is beyond the scope of this paper to probe further into such exchanges. Nevertheless, even without undertaking a comparative exercise, I believe I have shown that the *BhP*’s theodical insights are worthy of contemplation by theologians and philosophers of religion nonetheless.

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¹ This term appears to have been introduced by Gottfried Leibniz (c. 17th century), see (Hick 2010, p.6).

² In this paper, I take evil to be synonymous with suffering. Thus, the global distribution of evil refers to the global distribution of suffering, and a local instance of evil is a particular state of affairs in which an agent suffers.

³ It should be noted that there are alternate formulations of the evidential problem of evil advanced by Paul Draper (1989) and Michael Tooley (2019). In this paper, I primarily focus on the evidential argument from evil first advanced by William Rowe in 1979. However, many of the theodical insights that I highlight pertain to other formulations of the evidential argument from evil.

⁴ It is worth noting however, that the existence of suffering was a central problem for the ancient philosophical schools in India and did present a challenge to Hindu theistic traditions (Nicholson 2020, p.233).

⁵ This response is invoked in the *Brahmasūtra* (c. 5th century CE) and in the theological frameworks of Śaṅkara (c. 9th century CE) and Rāmānuja (c. 11th century CE) (Herman 1971; Clooney 1989). Recently, Whitley Kaufman has raised several objections to the coherence and theodical plausibility of a *karman* doctrine (Kaufman 2005; 2007).

⁶ In this article I consult two editions of the *BhP*. The first edition is that of Ganesh Tagare and J.L. Shastri, and I draw upon this version of the *BhP* when referencing verses whose meaning is uncontested and do not require further analysis. When I do this, I omit the “Tagare and Shastri 1950” and simply list the number of the page on which this verse or verses can be found. The other edition that I draw upon is that of Kṛṣṇaśaṅkara Śāstrī, and this is the edition I cite when referencing the original Sanskrit of the *BhP*. When providing page numbers for this latter edition, the style of my citations will be as follows: (the number of the book of the *BhP* and the volume of the book number if applicable [it is only applicable for the *BhP*’s tenth book since its sheer size necessitates multiple volumes], page number). For instance, the citation “(8, p.159)” would indicate that the reference is on page 159 of Śāstrī’s edition of the *BhP*’s eighth book, and the citation “(10:2, p.333)” would indicate that the reference is on page 333 of the second volume of Śāstrī’s edition of the *BhP*’s tenth book. The date and editor (Śāstrī) are omitted in my citations although they are listed in the bibliography.

⁷ Although scholars often refer to a *karman* doctrine as a *karman* theory, I prefer to use the term “doctrine” and not “theory” to connote the degree to which this concept is envisioned by various traditions as being an established fact and not merely a well-supported postulate.

⁸ *yasyāham anugrṇhāmi hariṣye tad-dhanaṁ śanaiḥ / tato ’dhanam tyajanty asya svajanā duḥkha-duḥkhitam // (10:6, p.1485).*

⁹ This view is shared by various commentators of the *BhP* such as Viśvanātha Cakravartin (17th century CE); see (Gupta 2013, pp.71-73).

¹⁰ *tenaiva satya-mānena sarva-jño bhagavān hariḥ / (6, p.270).*

¹¹ *mādṛk prapanna-paśu-pāśa-vimokṣaṇāya muktāya bhūri-karuṇāya namo ’layāya / (8, p.63).*

¹² *tvad-anupatham kulāyam idam ātma-suhṛt-priya-vac carati tathonmukhe tvayi hite priya ātmani ca* / (10:6, p.1137).

¹³ *samaḥ priyaḥ suhṛd brahman bhūtānām bhagavān svayam* / (7, p.63).

¹⁴ *tasmai namaḥ pareśāya brahmaṇe 'nanta-śaktaye* / (8, p.54).

¹⁵ *tvatto 'sya janma-sthiti-saṃyamān vibho vadanty anīhād aguṇād avikriyāt* / (10:1, p.497).

¹⁶ *kālaṃ karma svabhāvaṃ ca māyeśo māyayā svayā / ātman yadṛcchayā prāptam vibubhūsur upādade* // (2, p.189).

¹⁷ *dravyaṃ karma ca kālaś ca svabhāvo jīva eva ca / vāsudevāt paro brahman na cānyo 'rtho 'sti tattvataḥ* // (2, p.177).

¹⁸ *dravyaṃ karma ca kālaś ca svabhāvo jīva eva ca / yad-anugrahataḥ santi na santi yad-upekṣayā* // (2, p.472).

¹⁹ In this connection, it is worth noting that there are debates among Vedāntic traditions as to whether or not God can destroy the *prārabdha-karmic* residues (*karmic* residues that have already matured – such as the physical body) of the devotees. According to thinkers within the Vallabha and Caitanya traditions, God can destroy even the *prārabdha-karmic* residues of the devotees (Buchta 2016). This view finds support through *BhP* verses such as 3.33.6, which indicates that even a dog-eater can acquire the spiritual purity needed to perform Vedic sacrifices by hearing and chanting the name of God – a motif that suggests that the physical body (a manifestation of *prārabdha-karmic* merits and demerits) becomes transformed (and hence “destroyed” in one sense) on account of devotion to God (p.416). On account of this interpretation of God’s sovereignty over *karmic* mechanisms, I maintain that one can read the *BhP* as providing God with the ability to orchestrate the suffering devotees for God’s benevolent ends.

²⁰ *nūnaṃ me bhagavāṃs tuṣṭaḥ sarva-deva-mayo hariḥ / yena nīto daśām etāṃ nirvedaś
cātmanaḥ plavaḥ // (11, p.1027).*

²¹ *etāṃ sa āsthāya parātma-niṣṭhām adhyāsītām pūrvatamair maha-rṣibhiḥ / ahaṃ tariṣyāmi
duranta-pāraṃ tamo mukundāṅghri-niṣevayaiva // (11, p.1056).*

²² *BhP 10.27.15 - mayā te 'kāri maghavan makha-bhaṅgo 'nugrḥṇatā / mad-anusmṛtaye nityaṃ
mattasyendra-śriyā bhṛśam // (10:2, p.1089).*

*BhP 10.27.16 - mām aiśvarya-śrī-madāndho daṇḍa pāṇiṃ na paśyati / taṃ bhraṃśayāmi
sampadbhyo yasya cecchāmy anugrahaṃ // (10:2, p.1089).*

²³ *tvayeśānugrḥīto 'smi dhvasta-stambho vṛthodyamaḥ / īśvaram gurum ātmānaṃ tvām ahaṃ
śaraṇaṃ gataḥ // (10:2, p.1089).*

²⁴ *mā rodīd asya janānī gautamī pati-devatā / yathāhaṃ mṛta-vatsārtā rodimy aśru-mukhī
muhuh // (1, p.369).*

²⁵ *yathā kaṇṭaka-viddhāṅgo jantor necchati tāṃ vyathām / jīva-sāmyaṃ gato liṅgair na
tathāviddha-kaṇṭakaḥ // (10:1, p.1134).*

²⁶ *vipadaḥ santu tāḥ śaśvat tatra tatra jagad-guro / bhavato darśanaṃ yat syād apunar bhava-
darśanam // (1, p.398).*

²⁷ *vijaya-ratha-kuṭumbha ātta-totre dhrta-haya-raśmini tac-chriyekṣaṇīye / bhagavati ratir astu
me mumūrṣor yam iha nirīkṣya hatā gatāḥ svarūpam // (1, p.457).*

²⁸ *taṃ sarva-guṇa-vinyāsaṃ jīve māyāmāye nyadhāt / taṃ cānuśayam ātma-stham asāv anuśayī
pumān // jñāna-vairāgya-vīryeṇa svarūpa-stho 'jahāt prabhuh /// (4, p.554).*