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NIODA and the Problem of Evil: God as Ultimate Determiner

Javier Sánchez-Cañizares 

“Mind-Brain Group” at the Institute for Culture and Society (ICS) and “Science, Reason and Faith” Group (CRYF), University of Navarra, 31009 Pamplona, Navarra, Spain; js.canizares@unav.es

Abstract: The problem of evil permeates contemporary theodicy, raising the question of how an omnipotent and benevolent God can allow its existence. Exploring this inquiry is inherently tied to investigating divine action, specifically the interplay between time and eternity within a temporary creation. In recent decades, the Non-Interventionist Objective Divine Action (NIODA) project has endeavored to present a science-backed perspective that acknowledges a respectful divine action harmonizing with the workings of nature. However, this viewpoint has faced criticism from various angles, particularly for its perceived inability to provide a definitive response to the problem of evil. This contribution aims to overcome these criticisms. While not necessarily endorsing the NIODA proposal, it seeks to present a fresh outlook on the question of evil that aligns with NIODA, addressing the dichotomy between the unity and plurality of divine action in the world and offering novel insights for the Christian doctrine of creation.

Keywords: problem of evil; theodicy; NIODA; time and eternity in creation; natural determination

1. Introduction

The presence of evil in the world has long served as a central argument challenging the existence of an all-powerful and benevolent God. The coexistence of both raises doubts about either the goodness or omnipotence of God, undermining the conventional understanding of a personal God in theistic beliefs. Admittedly, one could employ an epistemic counterattack by questioning the origin of our knowledge of evil, suggesting that if we can discern evil, then God exists—*malum est, ergo Deus est*. However, this counterattack, although compelling from an epistemic standpoint, fails to address the fundamental quandary: How is it possible for an all-powerful and benevolent God to permit the existence of evil within His creation?

From a more metaphysical perspective, the problem of evil coalesces with the challenge of understanding divine action in the world. The latter serves as a vexing illustration of the difficulties inherent in reconciling divine causality with the causal power of creatures. In contemporary studies on divine action, the exploration navigates between two perilous paths: the Scylla of relying on interventionist explanations, often associated with the notion of a “god of the gaps”, and the Charybdis of rendering God superfluous if the primary cause remains undetectable within natural processes (Sánchez-Cañizares 2019). Without a comprehensive framework outlining divine action in the world, any endeavor to address the presence of evil and God’s accountability for it appears doomed to failure.

It comes as no surprise that recent endeavors to grapple with divine action in the world, particularly the “Non-Interventionist Objective Divine Action” (NIODA) project (Russell et al. 1993, 1995, 1998, 2001; Russell 1999) have encountered the classical challenge of theodicy. The NIODA project, in its pursuit to ascribe a role to God in determining specific effects within nature, inevitably faces the issue of God’s involvement in the evolutionary process, which, according to (Qureshi-Hurst 2023), leads to suffering and holds God accountable for the physical evil stemming from evolution. Regardless of God’s benevolent intentions in the long run, God remains implicated in the outcomes of natural processes and must, thus, assume responsibility, as posited within the framework of NIODA.



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This paper encompasses a range of objectives. Firstly, it aims to contextualize the problem of evil within the broader framework of divine action and the interplay of time and eternity (Section 2). By doing so, the intention is to alleviate the burden of automatically attributing accountability to an active God for all effects that arise through natural processes. Secondly, the paper seeks to present the relevant claims of the NIODA approach within this expanded framework (Section 3). It will examine whether criticisms of NIODA still hold within this new perspective (Section 4) and propose an alternative understanding of the theodicy problem that aligns with the NIODA approach (Section 5). While it does not necessarily require an endorsement of the NIODA perspective, the paper asserts that a thorough comprehension of it within the broader context of how the complete determination of created beings unfolds (Section 6) enables it to withstand scrutiny when confronted with the problem of evil. Furthermore, the paper introduces various insights into the doctrine of creation within this new perspective (Section 7) and concludes with a final remark to wrap up the contribution¹.

2. Time and Eternity in Divine Action

Any viable resolution to the problem of evil must address not merely the broader challenge of comprehending God's action in the world, but grapple with the more complex question of the relationship between time and eternity. From a theistic perspective, it is insufficient to consider a creator God who initiates the universe with the Big Bang and passively observes its development from a divine throne. Likewise, conceiving of God as a transcendental cause detached from the causal mechanisms governing the universe fails to capture the essence of the personal God portrayed in biblical theism—a God who maintains an ongoing commitment to His creation. The crucial question remains: How can we comprehend God's eternal action causing specific temporal effects?

In this context, traditional theism relies on the difference between "general divine action" (GDA) and "special divine action" (SDA). The crux of the matter revolves around the meaning of the term "special" (or sometimes "particular") and its articulation with the broader concept of God's general providence or GDA. The discussion settles within the conceptual framework defined by the classical division of special and general providence (Sánchez-Cañizares 2021). Proponents of SDA endeavor to elucidate that God's involvement extends beyond the creation and sustenance of the universe, which GDA encompasses, by actively shaping history by introducing novel elements into nature (Silva 2014, pp. 277–78). Consequently, the distinction between GDA and SDA is deemed essential.

At first glance, it appears inevitable that such a distinction implies an interventionist stance toward divine action in the universe, suggesting God's activity somehow competes with natural processes. It is important to note that, without further clarification, the GDA and the SDA perspectives could generate a conflict between the idea of a God who created the eternal laws that regulate every natural process and the idea of a God who continuously amends His creation. Consequently, a significant faction of SDA proponents seek a non-interventionist understanding of divine action, which entails one of the foremost motivations for the NIODA approach. However, theologians remain divided on whether the reasons adduced to reject the notion of divine intervention in the world are sufficiently compelling (Plantinga 2008, p. 383).

One may also raise the issue of whether the problem extends even deeper within theistic approaches and Abrahamic religions, as these belief systems wrestle with reconciling two seemingly contradictory notions: the unity of God's creation and the plurality of God's actions within it. In his *Systematic Theology*, Wolfhart Pannenberg has brought this issue to the forefront, recognizing the inherent tension of the multiplicity of God's acts within the unicity of divine action. Pannenberg highlights a structured and differentiated unity that reflects and corresponds to the trinitarian distinctions within God (Pannenberg 2004, p. 8). In other words, we encounter the profound mystery of creation itself—the unity

and unfolding of the latter through a temporality in which the eternal God is continually present and active.

The act of creation establishes a profound connection between creatures and God, extending beyond merely the origin of the world and its initial moments. This fundamental relationship between every creature and process and God entails a transition from eternity to time, as God moves from the immanence of His essence to the act of creation (Tanzella-Nitti 2002). This transition carries temporal effects, but remains eternal, with God serving as its ultimate transcendent foundation. While it is possible to consider particular effects of divine action within the framework of SDA, such consideration would be incomplete without acknowledging its inherent placement within GDA and God's eternal creation—a singular act that is inseparable, *quoad se*, from God Himself.

The perspective outlined above proves essential in navigating the intricate terrain of the problem of evil and suffering—central concerns of modern theodicy—within the theistic doctrine of providence. This doctrine “involves more than trust in God's daily care, in his direction and aid through life. It stands fast vis-a-vis the absurdity of suffering and guilt. Face to face with the obvious reign of death in the world, faith can make this affirmation only in expectation of the future of God and his rule in a renewed creation, which even death can no longer limit” (Pannenberg 2004, p. 54). To pursue a meaningful resolution to the problem of evil, it is futile and misguided to overlook its specific contextualization. Ultimately, one must consider every process within the broader framework of the global determination of the universe. In a temporally evolving creation, no single process exists bracketed from the interconnectedness of units of time with the unique eternity of God.

3. Reframing the Problem of Evil

Does this interconnectedness of time and eternity contribute to framing the problem of evil? I believe the answer is affirmative, and it can aid in shedding light on some contemporary approaches to theodicy, particularly in avoiding hasty categorizations of what evil is and its manifestations. To put it bluntly, to navigate the problem of evil more successfully, one must enhance one's understanding of the interplay between God's action and the causal powers inherent in creation. This endeavor includes delving into the relationship between primary and secondary causes, as commonly presented. However, such an exploration necessitates a thorough discussion of the connection between SDA and GDA and the intricate relationship between time and eternity. By delving into these aspects, one can achieve a more-nuanced understanding of the problem of evil.

How is the problem of evil typically presented within the context of classical theism? To gain insight into this matter, one can consult theodicy textbooks that highlight the apparent contradiction between the existence of a God who possesses unlimited power, comprehensive knowledge, and perfect goodness and the pervasive presence of evil and suffering throughout the world. The question of the origin of evil has roots as far back as ancient Greek philosophy (Meister 2009, p. 128). Traditionally, theodicy has sought to categorize and differentiate various types of evil based on different criteria. Evil can include natural disasters, intense suffering and pain, and physical, mental, or emotional impairments. Plus, one frequently distinguishes between natural and moral evil, the latter contingent upon the moral responsibility of agents. Undeniably, the most-compelling argument against God in the problem of evil emerges from the belief that His free and omnipotent nature should, in principle, prevent any emergence of the latter in His creation. The paradox becomes even more striking when contemplating gratuitous and horrendous evils—lacking any discernible purpose or justification and appearing unnecessarily severe (Meister 2009, pp. 129–31).

In the face of the existence of evil, one might attempt to reconcile the apparent contradiction by seeking solace in the mystery of God. One could argue that humans can never fully comprehend why God allows such evils to occur; only God Himself possesses that knowledge. Alternatively, one could invoke the perspective presented by Plantinga (Plantinga 1967, pp. 131–35; 1974, pp. 164–95; 1977, pp. 29–34), who brilliantly posits that it

might be impossible for God to create a world with free creatures who would never choose evil. To create beings capable of moral goodness, God must also allow for the possibility of moral evil. The potential for evil arises within the realm of creaturely freedom; it is not within divine power to simultaneously grant freedom and prevent all evil. According to Meister, scholars have effectively addressed the logical problem of evil. However, what remains is what he terms “the evidential problem of evil”, which suggests that if the theistic God exists, it is unlikely that He would create a world like ours, marred by suffering and evil (Meister 2009, pp. 134–35).

Nonetheless, even if we attempt to distinguish the evidential problem of evil from the logical problem, the former cannot offer more meaningful insights toward resolving the issue. This uncertainty arises because arguments based on probability are inherently challenging, relying on subjective information and conditioning. Can we truly engage in a rigorous comparison of happiness or goodness across possible worlds, evaluating the presence or absence of evil and considering all their ensuing consequences? It is highly doubtful, particularly considering our limited understanding of the objective meaning of happiness and goodness.

On the other hand, softer versions of theism, such as open theism, may argue that genuine contingency is inherent in the universe. However, adopting such a stance without careful examination would undermine the common theistic assumption of an omnipotent and omniscient God. The relationship between necessity and contingency requires thorough exploration; otherwise, one might find oneself confronted with the “existential problem of evil”—the overwhelming experience of certain types of evil leading to disbelief in God or religious faith in general. Many individuals deem themselves unable to believe in, let alone adore and worship, a personal God (Meister 2009, p. 138). At this juncture, it is tempting to invoke the inscrutability of God’s ways (Rom 11:33). Certainly, one can address the existential problem of evil by considering the discussion of God becoming human in Jesus of Nazareth, who suffered horrendous evil in his crucifixion, thereby identifying with human pain and suffering. Still, even if the compassionate presence of an incarnate God can alleviate non-theistic objections, it does not yet provide a complete solution to the problem of evil.

At the end of this section, it is paramount to acknowledge that, while we may ultimately encounter the mystery of God Himself, we should not hastily abandon the pursuit of a more-comprehensive framework that could potentially illuminate the problem of evil. Despite facing intense criticism, the NIODA project offers one possible framework. In the following sections, I will introduce the general perspective of NIODA, explore why some authors consider it inadequate in addressing the problem of evil, and propose ways to overcome these criticisms by fostering a deeper understanding of the intricate relationship between existence and determination in the context of creation.

4. The NIODA Perspective

Robert Russell and co-workers initially developed the project “Non-Interventionist Objective Divine Action” (NIODA) during the late 20th Century. Their collective focus centered on finding a conceptual framework that could accommodate divine action—particularly SDA—within the current scientific worldview. Despite objections raised by philosophers such as Plantinga and Silva (Plantinga 2008; Silva 2014), proponents of NIODA argue that an interventionist God would face challenges in terms of reconciling omniscience and omnipotence with the need to address all imperfections present in creation from the very beginning. Additionally, they seek to avoid the potential pitfalls of conflating divine causality with natural causality, thereby falling into the conceptual trap known as the god of the gaps.

The NIODA project implicitly adopts a view of nature that allows for non-physical causal powers to exist, suggesting that there are causes that cannot be fully understood or explained through the methods of physics alone. This perspective acknowledges that God can act within nature without violating any laws. This possibility arises because our current

understanding of the laws of nature does not explain the definite outcomes of natural processes as far as human observation allows. Quantum Mechanics (QM), the most-successful scientific theory to date, paradigmatically exemplifies this state of things. In QM, the precise knowledge of the wave function and its evolution through the Schrödinger equation only yields the probability of obtaining a specific outcome in an experiment². Furthermore, if we dismiss exotic interpretations such as superdeterminism, many-worlds interpretations, or Bohmian mechanics—each with their respective philosophical challenges—QM precludes the existence of a hidden physical mechanism that could cause the collapse of the wave function and determine a definitive outcome³.

Within the conceptual framework described and in keeping with the standard (Copenhagen) interpretation of QM, Russell posits the presence of fundamental ontological indeterminacy in nature. In other words, while natural causation is present and is necessary, it alone does not suffice to determine a quantum event. In this context, it becomes possible that God could directly act within quantum processes to bring about a specific outcome from among several possibilities. A key feature of such determination would be the irreversibility of the results, regardless of the size scale of the phenomena involved⁴ (Russell 2009). This perspective does not seek to explain or fully comprehend SDA, but rather, the collapse of the wave function provides a new conceptual framework that accommodates the possibility of SDA—God’s involvement in particular events within the world, which need not be limited to miracles. As explained earlier, these nuances clarify why Russell does not reduce divine causality to natural causality and remains unaffected by the god-of-the-gaps objection.

The NIODA project has faced numerous criticisms from various disciplines, although not all of these critiques demonstrate a thorough understanding of NIODA’s positions, the implications of QM, or the challenges of alternative interpretations of QM that some critics may endorse. Indeed, relying on the Copenhagen interpretation of QM may introduce some uncertainty and pose risks within the context of theodicy (Qureshi-Hurst 2023). These potential risks, however, are justifiable and necessary for two reasons: Firstly, theology strives to progress from mere belief to understanding, and theodicy must engage with the insights provided by our best scientific theories. Without this drive, meaningful dialogue between science and religion becomes impossible. Secondly, many scientific discoveries possess an irreversible character, QM being one of them. Therefore, exploring the implications of QM and incorporating them into theological discourse becomes imperative.

To the best of our knowledge, the open and indeterminate nature, apparently constrained to the sub-atomic realm, may extend and influence the macroscopic structure of reality. This ontological indeterminacy is not a peculiar feature confined to the microscopic scale that is invoked in an obscure manner to accommodate divine action. Understanding the transition from the quantum to the classical world remains one of the most-elusive problems in our current knowledge of the universe. We lack a unified theory that explains how nature determines itself at different physical scales. Therefore, it is conceivable that God’s causal action is present in every natural process, regardless of the physical scale involved. Contrary to the view put forth by Polkinghorne (Polkinghorne 1995), God’s action within the quantum framework need not be episodic, as the crossover between indetermination and determination could continually be at play in natural processes.

In summary, while the NIODA framework may initially appear unusual, it should not be dismissed as another instantiation of the god-of-the-gaps reasoning. This section has sought to shed light on the intellectual rigor underlying NIODA, although one need not endorse all of its particular details and nuances⁵. In the upcoming section, I will delve into the specific criticisms regarding how NIODA addresses the problem of evil.

5. The Problem of Evil: NIODA under Attack

In a recent paper, Qureshi-Hurst’s work has demonstrated the profound relevance of the NIODA project for theodicy. Particularly pertinent to our discussion is the thought-provoking issue posed by this author: if NIODA were to provide a successful version of SDA, God’s direct engagement in the evolutionary process that underlies natural history

would also account for the inherent suffering observed in evolution (Qureshi-Hurst 2023, p. 116).

Qureshi-Hurst had previously shown concerns about other aspects of NIODA, namely the lack of relevance of quantum effects at typical human scales, remoteness from our quotidian existence, or (allegedly) the impossibility of perception without intricate experimental setup. Given these apparent peculiarities, a crucial question emerges: How can these overall oddities be reconciled with the intimacy of the divine–human relationship? (Qureshi-Hurst 2023, p. 113). While one may acknowledge the relevance of these concerns, they seem to overlook the fundamental issue of the quantum-to-classical transition and how nature determines itself. Simply put, one cannot treat QM as a compartmentalized theory that coexists with a classical metaphysical understanding of the world. The latter necessitates an enhanced framework that enables the accommodation of SDA in a manner that respects the autonomy of creation.

All in all, Qureshi-Hurst’s primary focus revolves around challenging the credibility of NIODA when applied to the biological domain, specifically in addressing the problem of evil and formulating a satisfactory theodicy. She raises a critical point: “If God’s action in the quantum domain is not episodic, and instead God acts through quantum processes to actuali[z]e biological events like DNA mutations, then responsibility for diseases which come from such mutations must also lie with God” (Qureshi-Hurst 2023, p. 114). In essence, this implies that God would be directly accountable for the occurrence of diseases through His involvement in genetic mutations, as well as the cause of every individual instance of suffering, which seems to impose an excessively high cost for incorporating divine immanence into natural processes (Qureshi-Hurst 2023, pp. 114–15).

At this juncture, one might wonder whether these criticisms do not necessarily also apply to any scenario where God’s action in nature is causal, meaning that His involvement influences the development of His creation. From my perspective, there is no easy resolution unless the narrative provides a clear difference between the various causes at work. Of course, this is a critical concern when one runs into the problem of evil. However, it appears that NIODA does not surmount the risk of attributing to God the instrumentalization of innocent beings for others’ freedom and moral growth. It exacerbates the issue by positing God as causally and regularly active.

Thus, according to Qureshi-Hurst, NIODA may falter when considered in isolation. “But alongside a clearly articulated account of the puzzle of which it is a piece, it may yet be consonant with the Christian theology it is intended to serve” (Qureshi-Hurst 2023, p. 117). In other words, the challenge of constructing a theodicy that includes NIODA may not lie in the substance of the NIODA project itself, but rather in its incomplete integration with other fundamental principles of theism, especially within the Christian system of beliefs. In the following section, I will strive to establish connections between certain NIODA concepts and the Christian notion of hope, namely the participation and integration of time in eternity. By doing so, we can achieve an improved view of creatural determination and how it could contribute to a more-robust theodicy.

6. Evil as Irrational Lack of Determination

The NIODA project deserves recognition for its endeavor to articulate the relationship between divine action and natural causes in a non-interventionist manner, thereby avoiding the conflation of divine causality with created causality. While it is still a framework in progress rather than a fully elaborated account of SDA, the question remains: can NIODA offer insights into the problem of evil? The answer is affirmative, provided we identify the core issue and leverage the NIODA approach to overcome rigid and outdated metaphysical perspectives.

While theodicy often acknowledges that God permits the existence of evil in His creation, attributing evil’s causation to God in any general sense becomes a more-contentious matter. One could evade this issue by adhering to the conventional belief that God solely causes good things or events while allowing bad things or events as potential outcomes

resulting from contingent and eventually flawed actions of creatures. However, this narrow escape is not as good as it may seem. If we accept that God causally acts within creation and brings about effects that can be ascribed to Him, any attempt to confine His causality solely to positive outcomes leads to an arbitrary portrayal of God, who acts sporadically and, worse still, does not seek to prevent specific evils. The reasoning behind this conclusion is that only God Himself can impose a limitation on His causal activity.

In essence, it is inevitable to hold God accountable to some degree for the presence of evil as long as He is necessary for its existence. While the equation between causality and moral responsibility may not apply straightforwardly to human freedom, it becomes mandatory for an omnipotent and omniscient being such as the God of theism⁶. However, the NIODA project prompts us to revisit the problem of determination in the natural world and, in my view, presents an opportunity for a fresh perspective on the problem of evil, drawing inspiration from Augustinian thought.

Undoubtedly, if NIODA asserts that God is the ultimate determinant of reality in the present era, it will inevitably face the criticisms outlined in the previous section. However, attributing ultimate determinism to God within quantum processes—processes that extend throughout all levels of nature, not just the microscopic realm—does not necessarily imply a complete determination of a specific reality here and now. This ultimate determination can exist non-locally in space–time, as QM practitioners are well aware. In other words, determination need not be a metaphysical state precisely and definitively well-defined for all things at any time. Instead, it can be a gradual and incremental process, unfolding piecemeal through creation’s development. Only at the culmination of time, as Christian hope enlightens us, will creation and all its beings attain complete determination. At present, though, determination and indeterminism remain intertwined.

The advantage of such a view for theology, in general, and theodicy, in particular, should be evident. First, it reconciles SDA and GDA, illustrating that they are not distinct domains of God’s involvement in the world. Instead, SDA is seamlessly guided by GDA or, more accurately, is the outcome of divine action within the local limitations of the present moment. Second, this viewpoint offers a solution to the intricate interplay between the unity and plurality of God’s action, as discussed in Section 2. God’s action and causality are unified in His eternity, generating a structured diversity of effects within a creation that unfolds in time. Our oscillation between the perception of unicity and multiplicity when considering God’s action in the world reflects the correlation between numerous outcomes and an individual divine cause. Although we may identify distinct effects—such as miracles—stemming directly from God, they do not imply the existence of different acts. It is important to note that we cannot construct a comprehensive model of God’s action since we cannot model how eternity is perpetually present within the present moment. Third, the identity of creatures is not perfected until the culmination of time, when they stand interconnected to all other beings and God⁷. The completion of their identity implies the entirety of creation. Hence, evil at present could entail a relative and precarious identity destined to disappear according to Christian hope.

The cost we must bear is the acknowledgment that our human comprehension of reality is inherently imperfect, not solely due to the inherent limitations of our created intelligence, constrained by localized space and time, but also because of the lingering indeterminacy that persists until the culmination of time, when God may become all in all (1 Cor 15:28). Does this imply embracing a fluid process-oriented metaphysics? The answer is not at all, if we admit that created being is proportional to being determined—a fundamental requirement for finite beings, as dictated by classical metaphysics. Being created—as a participation in God’s Being—entails a harmonious interplay between determination and indeterminism across various types and degrees. Some instances exhibit potential for reversibility and apparent randomness (typically observed in the microscopic realms of nature), while others display substantial levels of determination and irreversibility (directedness) without yet attaining full completion.

What are the implications of this view when considering the problem of evil? The above-mentioned advantages provide valuable insight for understanding the presence of evil in the world. This insight might align with a process theodicy, inspired by process philosophy, with God's learning from finite beings, or with a soul-making, Irenaean-like theodicy, which posits that evil is a necessary component in the process of developing immature humans (Meister 2009, pp. 141–44). However, a more-compelling approach can still be found in the Augustinian perspective, which deems evil a metaphysical privation, a deprivation or absence of goodness—a *privatio boni*.

To define evil solely as non-being invites several critiques, as it appears to deny its existence. However, the viewpoint of the present contribution sheds light on the deficiencies inherent to evil itself. These deficiencies can be further clarified as a specific lack of determination, or indetermination within creation, aligning with the fundamental insights of NIODA. In other words, evil does not exist in fullness and, to a certain extent, serves as a manifestation of the various levels of indetermination present in creation, one of which critically refers to the effects of created freedom. However, more importantly, evil presents a perplexing puzzle and remains incomprehensible to humans due to its lack of determination. However, this raises the question: In what sense does evil differ from the ordinary indetermination of an unfolding creation?

Providing a comprehensive answer to this question may lie beyond human capabilities. Nevertheless, my proposition is that evil, characterized as non-being, is coextensive with indetermination, and greater evils—particularly moral, gratuitous, and horrendous—emerge when their associated unintelligibility becomes dominant⁸. Only through God's ultimate determination at the end of times can the entire situation affected by moral evil be fully comprehended. At this point, it becomes imperative to place our trust in God's ability to have the final say in His creation—a fundamental principle of Christian faith that is not always embraced by theodicy.

Be it as it may, the broader context of the divine plan can always encompass evil, despite its inherently irrational reality and partial rupture with the evolving order and rationality of creation. Yet, it is crucial to recognize the following: how evil plays a role in this overarching framework and how God, as the ultimate determiner, transforms evil into good, remains inaccessible, here and now, to human beings and other rational creatures. Even greater irrationality and, consequently, greater evil may emerge when these rational creatures attempt to usurp their Creator by assuming the task of ultimate determination on their own. Instead, rational creatures should strive to discern and pursue the particular possible goods awaiting partial completion without presuming to fulfill the role of ultimate determiner, which belongs solely to God⁹.

7. Insights for the Understanding of Creation

By focusing on the issue of outcome determination, the NIODA project has addressed the core aspect of framing God's action in the world. In doing so, it has helped to bring to the forefront the inherent challenge of reconciling the temporal development of creation with God's eternity while articulating SDA and GDA. Consequently, we can understand God's causal engagement in the world as both one and multifaceted, characterized by different structured effects. It is crucial to qualify these effects as interconnected, cautioning us against the fallacy of considering them in isolation.

As we grasp the essence of determination, we also begin to comprehend the fragility of existence and the even more-fragile nature of evil as an unintelligible manifestation of indetermination until God imparts the ultimate determination at the culmination of time. It is paramount to clarify that this ultimate determination, perceived by temporal beings as a last effect of God, is an intrinsic aspect of God's one and eternal creative activity. Building upon this newfound perspective on the problem of evil and engaging in dialogue with Silva's interpretation of Aquinas (Silva 2014), we can now delve into some other controversial issues within classical Christian metaphysics concerning the mystery of creation¹⁰:

1. According to Silva, Aquinas needs to expand his doctrine of divine action through dynamic moments because natural agents need the power of God to act. Therefore, the description of God's action as creative and conservative would be insufficient (Silva 2014, p. 284). However, in what precise sense is it? Does accepting this insufficiency not lead us back to a juxtaposition of moments or, even more concerning, impose limitations on the universal scope of God's creative action? From my viewpoint, not conceiving GDA as an action that reaches particular events (Silva 2014, p. 285) stems from poor conceptualization of the relationship between time and eternity. Therefore, the language of making explicit the implicit aspects of God's action, manifested in many effects, remains the most-appropriate in this context, provided we wish to avoid the risk of anthropomorphism. The problem of evil serves as a reminder that one may not detach God's ultimate determination of creation from His creative act.

2. Aquinas teaches how divine providence not only guides the entire universe as such, but also directs each event, in its individuality, through secondary causes. The first cause guides each being hence, it is not necessary to duplicate God's action (Silva 2014, pp. 285–86). After all, what does it mean to govern the entire universe if not to govern each event in its singularity? However, if that is the case, the articulation between GDA and SDA becomes controversial¹¹. The criterion that Silva emphasizes to differentiate the dimensions of divine causality in Aquinas is the distinction between the foundational dimension and the dynamic dimension. To avoid the problem of juxtaposing different orders, it is necessary, in my opinion, to conceive of the dynamical moments as internal and intrinsic components of the unfolding of the foundational moments, analogous to how the temporal unfolding of creation is an inherent aspect of its specific nature rather than something external added to it. Evil is also an internal and intrinsic moment of creation. Because of its unintelligibility for creatures, evil yearns for eschatological completion.

3. Those who defend the distinction between GDA and SDA eventually need to acknowledge certain intermittency in natural causality, as God needs to constantly update the causal potential of agents for them to be effective (Silva 2014, p. 284). However, we must question whether this intermittency occurs in a constantly changing nature. Is it present in all forms of natural causality to the same extent? It becomes challenging to assume a discontinuity in the causal power of a universe where everything is interconnected. NIODA teaches that quantum entanglement is the baseline for the continuous unfolding of different degrees of determination in nature to take off. Yet, if every particular completion awaits God's ultimate completion, it becomes nonsensical to speak of intermittency in the causal network of the universe. Such intermittency could be just an artifact of our limited human cognitive capacities.

4. According to Silva and Aquinas, God utilizes natural agents to produce effects that surpass their causal power (Silva 2014, p. 282). This procedure is how God causes effects that transcend the nature of secondary causes (Silva 2014, p. 287). As the first cause, God's providence (GDA) utilizes the indeterminacies and contingencies of nature and its effects to bring about new instances of being in the universe while guiding it toward its ultimate purpose (Silva 2014, p. 290). However, this can lead to a circular argument or beg the question: How can we determine what is or is not proportionate to the natural causal power? Here, we do not just refer to the extant effect, but to its specific and concrete form. Can our human knowledge truly ascertain when an effect surpasses the power of its natural causes? In this case, the typical analogy with instrumental causality to explain the relationship between divine and secondary causes may not be applicable. However, the problem of evil offers a glimpse into how this might be possible, as evil appears to be a state of affairs that necessitates completion unless it, and the world itself, remains unintelligible. In other words, evil serves as a reminder that the universe awaits its final determination by God.

5. Aquinas asserts that, while the divine will is unfailing, some of its effects are contingent. Secondary causes determine the action of the first cause concerning specific outcomes, thus imposing certain limitations on the first cause (Silva 2014, p. 283). Aquinas

accepts the contingency inherent in natural causality because, otherwise, the universe would be imperfect. Even when natural causation fails to achieve its intended effect, divine intentionality directs the outcome for the overall good of the universe (Silva 2014, p. 290). This perspective aligns with the metaphysical interpretation of the folk-saying, “God writes straight with crooked lines.” The solution to the problem of evil outlined in this contribution highlights that God’s ultimate intentionality does not supervene on natural causation but is essential as its ultimate determination. God’s intentionality is inherently causal within the context of His creative action.

6. Lastly, one must note a point of convergence between Aquinas and the participants in the contemporary debate on SDA, despite their different reasons for admitting the contingency of natural causality (Silva 2014, p. 288). The question arises: How can we scientifically apprehend causal contingency? I believe that scientific research can only reveal a fundamental indeterminism, indicating the presence of ontological contingency in causality (Sánchez-Cañizares 2016). Scholars such as Russell (Russell 1997, pp. 44–45), Tracy (Tracy 1995, pp. 294, 310), and Murphy and Ellis (Murphy and Ellis 1996, p. 214) have appropriately highlighted this aspect. I am not suggesting that our knowledge of nature must be limited to scientific knowledge alone. However, we must always consider the insights provided by scientific inquiry¹², to wit: QM reveals the fundamental indeterminacy of nature, and the problem of evil directs us toward the necessity of eschatological completion within creation.

8. Conclusions

“Only the eschatological consummation of the world can definitively demonstrate the righteousness of God, and therefore his deity, in the work of creation” (Pannenberg 2004, p. 173). This contribution has pursued multiple objectives: First, it aimed to highlight the inextricable connection between the problem of evil and the intricate issue of understanding the relationship between time and eternity in God’s action. Second, it sought to acknowledge the value of new scientific-inspired approaches, such as the NIODA project, in elucidating how God may interact with the world in complete harmony with the natural order of creation. The combination of indeterminism and determination throughout natural history emerges as a promising avenue within these approaches, as it offers a more-nuanced explanation for the existence of evil. Finally, it intended to explore how such a perspective provides fresh insights into the theological exploration of the mystery of creation and the interplay between the unity and plurality of God’s action and effects, respectively.

Someone such as Alexander Pope would say there is no evil in the world and all is an illusion. Whereas I am sympathetic to the implications of Pope’s claim, I believe it introduces a false dichotomy by presenting evil as either existing or not existing. In this paper, on the contrary, I have sought to demonstrate with the support of an ontologically indeterminate nature, i.e., not wholly determined in time, that one can perceive evil in a diminished manner without outright denial. It may be true that, regarding evil, “[n]o one has yet provided a solution that is universally satisfactory [and] [p]erhaps requiring such is to expect more than is within the realm of human possibility” (Meister 2009, p. 144). However, such a possibility does not permit us to abandon the internal movement of faith that seeks understanding, attentively engages with scientific insights, and hopes for the ultimate triumph of good over evil through God’s creative power.

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Notes

- ¹ My focus in this paper is explicitly on evil as it affects human beings, and I have not addressed the problem of evil for non-human animals. While I recognize that many theodicies encompass the problem of evil affecting all sentient beings and possibly all creatures, I adopt a different stance in which evil for humans has a fundamentally distinct character from evil for non-humans.
- ² The ontological indeterminacy found in Quantum Mechanics extends beyond sub-atomic particles; it possesses a broader scope. Our current understanding lacks a physical theory that adequately describes the crossover from indeterminacy to determination, namely the quantum-to-classical transition. Accordingly, there might be varying degrees of indeterminacy at different levels of nature.
- ³ This is the foremost philosophical gain of the Kochen–Specker theorem (Kochen and Specker 1967), one of the most-significant achievements in the field.
- ⁴ For the relationship between decoherence and irreversibility in physical systems, see (Fortin and Lombardi 2018).
- ⁵ I have reservations about the likelihood of successfully scientifically determining a distinct divine action. It could be beneficial for scientists to rekindle an appreciation for the sense of mystery that pervades nature, considering that certain assumptions and limitations within science allude to it. The epistemic boundaries of science remind us of a reality that our knowledge cannot always comprehensively understand or predict. It is important to note that, while epistemic indeterminacy is a necessary ingredient, it is not sufficient, per se, to infer God’s action in the world. Created causes transcending human knowledge could also ontologically shape natural progression.
- ⁶ “[E]ven then limiting responsibility for an evil deed to the doer is not convincing if another might have prevented the doer from doing it. This is especially true in the case of the Creator, who does not stand apart from his creatures but brought them into being. If an act is the result of a free decision on the part of the doer, the freedom is itself a work of the creator, and we cannot think of its exercise apart from his cooperation. Why did not God so order the world that his creatures are protected against sin and evil?” (Pannenberg 2004, p. 166).
- ⁷ This assertion holds regardless of whether some creatures, such as specific animals, will exist in the final state of time. The rationale is that, even the past, as a historical reality, remains partially undetermined until the ultimate culmination of time.
- ⁸ About the inability of human ethics to confront a technology that becomes evil by refusing to be constrained by the limits of reason, see (Beltramini 2021, pp. 278–79).
- ⁹ While one may rightly reject a consequentialist theory of ethics, such a rejection need not apply when explaining the divine plan in creation. It is an inherent aspect of Christian ethics to entrust the ultimate outcomes of natural processes and human actions to God. However, for non-consequentialist ethics that uphold moral absolutes, humans are forbidden from usurping God by using pros and cons as the moral criterion for their actions. Human ethics, grounded in the present and concrete, should not seek to control the entire determination of reality.
- ¹⁰ Some of these questions have already been pointed out (Sánchez-Cañizares 2021).
- ¹¹ In my view, discussing SDA reveals a partial understanding of the nature of creation. Deism also shares this misunderstanding that arises from perceiving temporality or natural dynamism merely as a backdrop rather than recognizing it as an integral part of the created order and all the subsequent implications. Another unintended consequence of the approach that pits SDA against GDA is the tendency to depict SDA as competing with natural causality.
- ¹² Silva’s analysis of how Aquinas understands contingency in natural causality, particularly the idea that God does not act out of necessity, is especially suggestive. The notion of divine providence requires that the natural world includes some indeterminism and contingency in the effects of its agents (*Summa contra Gentiles* 3, chaps. 72 and 74) (Silva 2014, pp. 287–88). Consequently, it seems reasonable to assume that this contingency should manifest itself in some way within scientific knowledge. Epistemologically, the contingency inherent in nature could manifest in our inability to discover deterministic laws that provide enough reasons for the observed processes. It is a causality that the principle of sufficient reason cannot comprehend; it is, thus, crucial to avoid implicitly equating causality with said principle (Pereda 2014, p. 134). Human reason appears to be fundamentally limited in its capacity to comprehend particularizations in the universe.

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