

A Four-Case Defense of the Authorial Model of Divine Providence

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Abstract: Some advocates of the doctrine of meticulous (“risk-free”) divine providence, in response to the charge that such a strong view of divine providence makes God the “author of evil,” have appealed to an authorial model according to which the relationship of God to his creation is analogous to that of a human author and his or her literary creation. This response appears vulnerable to the objection that there is a critical *disanalogy* between the two kinds of authorship: in the case of divine authorship, unlike that of human authorship, the story is *intentionally actualized*, and thus the divine author is morally culpable for the evils written into that story. Call this the “actuality objection.” In this paper, I develop a four-case defense of the authorial model that aims to neutralize the actuality objection. I also respond to five objections to the authorial model and my defense of it.

1. Risk-Free Divine Providence and the “Author of Evil” Objection

According to the doctrine of divine providence, which is arguably a mainstay of historic Christian theology, God sustains and rules over his creation as its sovereign Creator and directs the course of events within the creation, especially in human affairs.¹ Interpretations of this doctrine fall broadly into two categories: *risky* views of providence and *risk-free* views of providence.² Risky views maintain that God has ultimate control over the world, but events in the world do not

¹ Paul Helm, *The Providence of God*, *Contours of Christian Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1993); David Fergusson, “Providence,” in *T&T Clark Handbook of Analytic Theology*, ed. James M. Arcadi and James T. Turner Jr., *T&T Clark Handbooks* (London: T&T Clark, 2021), 155–63.

² Helm, *The Providence of God*, 39–68; William Hasker, “God Takes Risks,” in *Contemporary Debates in Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Michael L. Peterson and Raymond J. VanArragon (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), 218–27; Paul Helm, “God Does Not Take Risks,” in *Contemporary Debates in Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Michael L. Peterson and Raymond J. VanArragon (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), 228–37.

necessarily conform to his will. In other words, while God has a “Plan A” for his creation, that plan is not infallibly fulfilled and can be frustrated, at least in the short term, by the free actions of his creatures. In creating a world with free creatures, God accepts the risk that events will not unfold as he intends or wishes them to. The main contenders for risky views of providence are the Simple Foreknowledge view and the Open Theist view.³

In contrast, risk-free views hold that God exercises *meticulous providence* over his creation. God not only has ultimate control over the world, but also directs events down to the last detail, including (by some means or other) the free actions of his creatures. God has an eternal decree for his creation that is infallibly executed: nothing happens other than what God has decreed.⁴ God therefore faces no risk that events will unfold in ways contrary to his wishes or intentions. The main contenders for risk-free views of providence are the Augustinian view and the Molinist view.⁵ The primary difference between Augustinians and Molinists is that the former openly embrace divine determinism—even divine *causal* determinism—and thus reject libertarian (non-deterministic) accounts of creaturely freedom, whereas the latter wish to affirm libertarian freedom and contend that such an account can be reconciled with meticulous divine providence by appealing to God’s “middle knowledge.”⁶

³ Dean W. Zimmerman, “The Providential Usefulness of ‘Simple Foreknowledge,’” in *Reason, Metaphysics, and Mind: New Essays on the Philosophy of Alvin Plantinga*, ed. Kelly James Clark and Michael C. Rea (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 174–96; Greg Welty, “Open Theism, Risk-Taking, and the Problem of Evil,” in *Philosophical Essays Against Open Theism*, ed. Benjamin H. Arbour (New York: Routledge, 2019), 140–58. There are variations of both views, but all entail some risk on God’s part.

⁴ As the Westminster Confession of Faith (3.1) puts it, “God, from all eternity, did, by the most wise and holy counsel of his own will, freely, and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass.”

⁵ As I use the term, the Augustinian view would include both Thomists and Calvinists (which need not be mutually exclusive categories).

⁶ Alfred J. Freddoso, “Molinism,” in *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward Craig (London: Routledge, 1998); Thomas P. Flint, *Divine Providence: The Molinist Account* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998). In my view, Molinism is a version of divine *non-causal* determinism, but I won’t defend that claim here. Oliver Crisp has recently defended (without endorsing) a position he calls “libertarian Calvinism,” which seeks to reconcile Calvinistic concerns with a libertarian view of free will. For some concerns about the viability of this position, see James N. Anderson and Paul Manata, “Determined to Come Most Freely: Some Challenges for Libertarian Calvinism,” *Journal of Reformed Theology* 11, no. 3 (2017): 272–97.

One common objection to risk-free views of divine providence is that they make God the “author of evil” or “author of sin.” Augustinians have been especially susceptible to this objection. If God *causally determines* whatsoever comes to pass, including the sinful actions of his creatures, doesn’t that make God the ultimate source of sin and therefore culpable for sin? How could a holy and righteous God willingly decree all the appalling evils that his creatures commit? While Molinists hold to a doctrine of meticulous providence in common with Augustinians, they have often wielded the “author of evil” objection against Augustinians.⁷ However, given that Molinists share with Augustinians the claim that God infallibly decrees a world in which his creatures commit heinous sins, it is hard to see how they are not equally vulnerable to the charge.⁸ Whether God exercises his decree by “strongly” or “weakly” actualizing the world seems beside the point; in either case, God *deliberately* and *infallibly* actualizes a world with a tremendous amount of sin and evil. On any risk-free view, in virtue of executing an infallible pre-creational decree, God can be regarded as the ultimate author of the history of the world. Does it not follow that God is thereby the ultimate author of the *evils* of the world?

2. The Authorial Model Response

Perhaps surprisingly, some advocates of risk-free providence have defended against the “author of evil” charge by leaning into the notion that God is the ultimate author of the history of the world. Augustinians in particular have appealed to an “authorial model” of divine providence, arguing that God’s acts of creation and providence can be considered analogous to the human authorship of a literary work containing characters who commit evil actions without the author approving

⁷ For example, William Lane Craig claims that “divine determinism” makes God the “author of sin.” Dennis W. Jowers, ed., *Four Views on Divine Providence*, Counterpoints (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), 60–61, 91. Cf. Kenneth Keathley, *Salvation and Sovereignty: A Molinist Approach* (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2020), 4, 25.

⁸ Greg Welty has argued—persuasively in my view—that Molinism is no less susceptible to the “author of sin” objection, and that any moves Molinists might make to avoid the objection can be mirrored by Calvinists without any recourse to Molinist distinctives. Greg Welty, “Molinist Gunslingers: God and the Authorship of Sin,” in *Calvinism and the Problem of Evil*, ed. David E. Alexander and Daniel M. Johnson (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2016), 56–77.

those actions.⁹ The human author of a novel can be regarded as the creator of a world in which characters commit various sins, but we would not say that the author *himself* commits those sins or that the author *himself* bears any culpability for the sins of his characters.¹⁰ Indeed, we might well say that in conceiving and writing his novel, the human author “executes an infallible decree.”¹¹ But even if his characters commit heinous sins, it seems obviously wrong to say that the novelist is the “author of evil” in anything but a benign sense.

Reformed theologian John Frame provides a suitably representative example of the authorial model being deployed to address the “author of evil” objection:

Let us consider to what extent God’s relationship to human sinners is like that of Shakespeare to Macbeth, the murderer of Duncan. ... I agree, of course, that both Macbeth and Shakespeare are responsible, at different levels of reality, for the death of Duncan. But as I analyze the language that we typically use in such contexts, it seems clear to me that we would not normally say that Shakespeare killed Duncan. Shakespeare wrote the murder into his play. But the murder took place in the world of the play, not the real world of the author. Macbeth did it, not Shakespeare. We sense the rightness of Macbeth paying for his crime. But we would certainly consider it very unjust if Shakespeare were tried and put to

⁹ John M. Frame, “The Problem of Evil,” in *Suffering and the Goodness of God*, ed. Christopher W. Morgan and Robert A. Peterson, Theology in Community (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008), 141–64; Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Remythologizing Theology: Divine Action, Passion, and Authorship*, Cambridge Studies in Christian Doctrine (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Hugh J. McCann, *Creation and the Sovereignty of God*, Indiana Series in the Philosophy of Religion (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2012), 107–8; James N. Anderson, “Calvinism and the First Sin,” in *Calvinism and the Problem of Evil*, ed. David E. Alexander and Daniel M. Johnson (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2016), 208–10. To my knowledge, Kevin Vanhoozer has offered the most extensive exposition and defense of the authorial model to date. In principle Molinists could also adopt the authorial model, but I am unaware of any Molinists who do so. Perhaps this is because Augustinians are usually the prime targets for the “author of evil” objection.

¹⁰ There’s certainly a sense in which the author is “ultimately responsible” for those sins—after all, those sins would not have been committed had he not created the characters and written the story—but obviously that kind of responsibility doesn’t entail blameworthiness. (I trust that readers can tolerate the exclusive use of masculine pronouns for the ‘authors’ discussed throughout this paper, although I believe this usage is justified by the context.)

¹¹ By “infallible” I mean that the decree cannot fail to be fulfilled, not that the author is infallible with respect to the merits of the story (character development, plot cogency, creativity, etc.).

death for killing Duncan. And no one suggests that there is any problem in reconciling Shakespeare's benevolence with his omnipotence over the world of the drama. Indeed, there is reason for us to praise Shakespeare for raising up this character, Macbeth, to show us the consequences of sin.¹²

I too have appealed to the authorial model (in contrast to what I dubbed the "domino model" of divine providence) in defending divine causal determinism against the charge that it makes the problem of evil intractable:

On this way of thinking God's acts of creation and providence are analogized to the human authoring of a novel. At the ultimate level, the author *determines* everything that takes place in his novel. He creates a world and he populates it with characters. Indeed, he *creates* the characters—in a relative sense, he brings them into existence. He bestows them with certain personalities and causal powers (which need not correspond to the causal powers in his own world—think fantasy and sci-fi genres). The author sets up the circumstances in which the characters live and play out their roles in the overarching storyline. Some of the characters may commit morally objectionable, even wicked actions—actions which the author himself disapproves, but which are necessary for the sake of the story and its outcome. Tolkien presumably did not morally approve of Gollum's actions in *The Lord of the Rings*, but the novels would hardly have been the same without Gollum and his schemes. As we all recognize, a good story can contain bad characters who commit wicked acts; indeed, one could argue that a *truly* good story would *have* to contain such elements. We might say then that the author of the novel has *ordained* that sinful actions take place *within* the world he has created, but the author himself does not thereby commit any sinful actions or imply his approval of them. In a broad sense, the novelist is the first and ultimate sufficient cause of everything that takes place in his creation. Yet at the same time, this authorial causation operates on a very different level than the *intranarrative* causes. An Oxford don does not appear in Middle Earth and place the One Ring on Sméagol's finger.¹³

¹² Frame, "The Problem of Evil," 162–63. Cf. John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2002), 156–59.

¹³ Anderson, "Calvinism and the First Sin," 208–9.

3. The Actuality Objection to the Authorial Model

The authorial model of divine providence has considerable appeal.¹⁴ It honors divine transcendence and the ontological Creator-creation distinction, capturing the classical theist conviction that the Creator and the creation do not operate on the same ontological level.¹⁵ It neatly accommodates the distinction between God as primary cause and creatures as secondary causes. The model reflects the emphasis in Scripture on *divine speech acts*: the creation is brought into existence and providentially sustained by the ‘word’ of God (Gen. 1; Ps. 33:6, 9; Isa. 55:10-11; Heb. 1:3; 11:3). Coupled with the doctrine of the *imago Dei*, it also suggests an explanation for our own remarkable capacity for creative authorship: human authoring is a creaturely reflection of the original divine authoring.

Nevertheless, the authorial model seems vulnerable to an obvious objection. There is a critical disanalogy between human authorship and divine authorship: in the case of a human work of fiction, the characters in the work *don’t really exist* and their evil actions *aren’t committed in the actual world*. The work of fiction is precisely that: a *fictional* work. The novelist “actualizes a world” in a merely figurative sense, whereas God (according to the authorial model) *literally* actualizes the world according to his infallible decree. Doesn’t this point of disanalogy completely undercut the utility of the authorial model as a defense of God’s non-culpability?

Paul Maxwell is one critic who puts the matter particularly forcefully. Commenting on John Frame’s use of the authorial analogy, Maxwell writes:

Frame’s explanation of the analogy fails for a simple reason. What God “writes”—and effects by the insurmountable determination of his will—in the “story” of creation *actually happens*. Therefore, a closer analogy is not an author of fiction to the fictional story, but rather a criminal conspirator. If a conspirator plans and accomplishes a bank robbery in

¹⁴ On the utility and propriety of models in theology, see Oliver D. Crisp, “The Importance of Model Building in Theology,” in *T&T Clark Handbook of Analytic Theology*, ed. James M. Arcadi and James T. Turner Jr., T&T Clark Handbooks (London: T&T Clark, 2021), 9–19.

¹⁵ Frame, “The Problem of Evil,” 162; Vanhoozer, *Remythologizing Theology*, 303.

order to give all the stolen money to cancer research, *the robbery was still both criminal and immoral*.¹⁶

Along the same lines, Maxwell criticizes my appropriation of the authorial model and the distinction I draw between α -causation (transcendent divine causation of events in the world) and β -causation (immanent creaturely causation within the world):

The entire question at hand, however, is *whether God's α -causing evil makes him in any sense culpable*. The most Anderson does to explain why God's α -causing a creature's β -causing of evil does not make him culpable is to say that God's actions are the same as "authoring a novel in which sinful acts are committed, even though morally disapproved by the author."¹⁷ This is merely, then, a sophisticated restatement of a failed analogy. Once again, this analogy fails to the extent that the events God authors *actually happen in the real world, and were intended by God to actualize in the real world*. Therefore, once again, comparing God's predestination of the world to a fiction author is a false analogy, and a better analogy would be—short of a sufficiently appropriate one—a screenwriter and director for a pornographic film, since "God has real pleasure in attaining the purposes of his will."¹⁸ The author intends for the sins to be written to be made manifest by other actors, solidifying a metaphysical direct connection between cause and effect—which are, in this

¹⁶ Paul C. Maxwell, *The Trauma of Doctrine: New Calvinism, Religious Abuse, and the Experience of God* (Lanham, MD: Fortress Academic, 2021), 71.

¹⁷ Maxwell here cites Anderson, "Calvinism and the First Sin," 211.

¹⁸ Maxwell elaborates on this analogy in an endnote: "I use the term 'pornographic' here, because the author/book metaphor for God/creation does not account for the fact that the content God conceives (formally causes) and ordains (efficiently and finally causes) *really happens*. So, any metaphor between God and creation must take into account the fact that the event [sic] God creatively originates, and hence creates, *actually occur*, and for that reason he is morally related to their occurrence—perhaps not in the same way as the actors, but as a director who directs actors to perform morally evil acts." Maxwell's statements invite one correction: in the authorial model of divine providence, the 'book' would correspond to the divine decree, rather than the creation itself, which properly corresponds to the 'world' depicted in the 'book'. But leaving that aside, Maxwell's main concern is clearly expressed: the problem is that the events in the story "really happen" and "actually occur."

case, God and sin. In other words, the book God “authors” dictates the nature of real events.

For that reason, culpability remains on the table.¹⁹

Let us call this the *actuality objection* to the authorial model.²⁰ According to this objection, the authorial model fails to absolve God of culpability for the evils of the world because of a crucial point of disanalogy: unlike human authorship of a novel, in the case of divine authorship the evils are *knowingly and intentionally actualized*.²¹

4. A Four-Case Defense of the Authorial Model

I will now offer a four-case defense of the authorial model that aims to neutralize the actuality objection.²² The argument begins with the ordinary case of a human author creating a fictional world by way of a literary work. In this initial case, it is uncontroversial that the author does nothing morally wrong by creating this world; indeed, he may be morally praiseworthy. Each subsequent case changes one aspect of the scenario to bring it closer to the authorial model of divine providence, but I argue that none of these changes introduces moral culpability on the part of the author. The challenge for the proponent of the actuality objection is to identify at which point in the series of cases authorial culpability is introduced, and to explain *why* it arises at that point.

¹⁹ Maxwell, *The Trauma of Doctrine*, 73.

²⁰ Vanhoozer gestures toward the same objection, although he does not directly address it. Vanhoozer, *Remythologizing Theology*, 308.

²¹ Some philosophers think God could not be morally blameworthy *in principle* because God is not a member of our “moral community” and therefore cannot be a proper object of moral blame. If they are correct about this, the actuality objection could be reformulated in terms of an apparent conflict between the authorial model and certain divine attributes (holiness, righteousness, moral perfection, etc.).

²² This four-case defense is loosely inspired by Derk Pereboom’s four-case manipulation argument against compatibilist accounts of free will. Derk Pereboom, *Living without Free Will* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); John Martin Fischer et al., *Four Views on Free Will* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007). Pereboom’s four-case argument has been widely discussed in the contemporary literature on free will. For the record, I don’t endorse Pereboom’s argument, but it represents an ingenious argumentative strategy that invites broader application.

Case 1: Tolkien's LOTR

Case 1 involves a human author creating an elaborate fictional world through one or more literary works. To make the “intuition pump” as robust as possible, we will draw from a well-known real-life case of authorship. In this first case, J. R. R. Tolkien writes *The Lord of the Rings* and thereby creates (in the imaginative sense) the realm of Middle Earth with all its inhabitants: humans, hobbits, dwarfs, elves, wizards, orcs, and so forth. In this fictional world, various free actions are performed by the characters, some of which are morally good and others morally bad. Furthermore, in the story of their world, the characters are also subject to various experiences: some pleasurable and some painful; some beneficial and some harmful. Although Tolkien is the creator of this world and its characters, the sole author of its storyline, and thus he “ordains whatsoever comes to pass” in Middle Earth, no one would think that he is culpable for the immoral actions committed by his characters or that he is morally blameworthy because they experience suffering and harm. On the contrary, we can recognize that *The Lord of the Rings* is a good story—an *exceedingly* good story—and that Tolkien is morally praiseworthy as its author. Indeed, we might go so far as to say that all things considered, the *negative* elements of the story (i.e., the immoral actions and sufferings of the characters) contribute *positively* to the overall goodness of the story and the merits of its author. If Tolkien had omitted those elements—if he had written a story in which nothing bad ever happened—he would not have been as morally praiseworthy as an author.

Case 2: Tolkien's LOTR Unwittingly Actualized

Consider now a second case in which Tolkien writes *The Lord of the Rings*, just as in the first case, but due to a freak metaphysical anomaly, the novel is actualized in a parallel universe. We may stipulate that there is a causal connection between Tolkien's authoring activity and the actualization of Middle Earth with all its inhabitants and their actions.²³ Tolkien himself is blissfully unaware of this, but Tolkien's authoring of the story *realizes* the story exactly as he conceived it.²⁴ There's a sense in which Tolkien is *causally responsible* for the existence of Middle

²³ It doesn't matter for the argument how the parallel universe is related to Tolkien's universe, except to say that there is some kind of causal connection between the two.

²⁴ Case 2 is inspired by the novel *Sphere* by Michael Crichton, in which scientists discover a mysterious object deep under the sea that enables people's subconscious thoughts to be manifested in reality. At first, the scientists have no

Earth and the events that take place within it, but it's also clear enough that Tolkien is not to be blamed for it. The immediate reaction to this observation might well be, "So what? Tolkien isn't culpable for the actions of Saruman, Gollum, and so on, because he didn't *know* that his story would be actualized, and he didn't *intend* for it to be actualized." True enough. Nevertheless, Case 2 is significant for this reason: *the mere fact that the story is actualized* doesn't render the author culpable for the bad things that take place in the story. This helps us to see clearly that one point of disanalogy between the human authorship of a novel and the divine authorship of the creation—namely, that in the case of divine authorship the creation *really exists*—isn't morally problematic in and of itself. Actualization *per se* is not the issue.

Case 2.5: Tolkien's LOTR Intentionally Actualized but Sanitized

At this juncture I will take some liberty and insert an ancillary case that deviates from Case 2 in *two* respects, but nonetheless helps us to draw another important conclusion. In this case—call it Case 2.5—Tolkien writes *The Lord of the Rings* but is fully aware of the freak metaphysical anomaly and therefore *knows* and *intends* that his story will be actualized in a parallel universe. (This is the first point of difference: the author's knowledge and intent.) However, this story is not *The Lord of the Rings* as we know it; instead, it is a thoroughly sanitized version in which all characters perform only morally good actions and no one suffers any harm or pain. (This is the second point of difference: no evil or suffering in the story.) It should be evident that Tolkien in this scenario does not commit any moral wrong by *intentionally actualizing* his story.²⁵ Why is this important? For this reason: while Case 2 shows that actualization as such is not the problematic aspect of the authorial model, Case 2.5 shows that neither is *intentional* actualization as such. If there is a critical flaw in the authorial model, it doesn't lie in the mere fact that divine authorship involves *intentional actualization*.²⁶

idea that the manifestations are being caused by their own thoughts, and it is assumed that they are not culpable for the harm that results from the unwitting actualization of their imaginations.

²⁵ Unless perhaps we think that there's something morally deficient about writing such an anodyne story.

²⁶ Recall Maxwell's criticism: the authorial analogy "fails to the extent that the events God authors *actually happen in the real world, and were intended by God to actualize in the real world.*"

Case 3: Tolkien's LOTR Intentionally Actualized and Unsanitized

No doubt the immediate response to Case 2.5 will be that it is irrelevant precisely because nothing *bad* happens in the (intentionally actualized) story. No one commits evil. No one suffers any harm. If there's nothing bad, then obviously there's nothing for which God could be blamed. But there are many bad things in the story of *this* world, the world that God has *in fact* authored (according to the authorial model). The story of the real world is far from a sanitized story. So let's remedy that omission in Case 3, which is the proper successor to Case 2. In this third scenario, Tolkien writes *The Lord of the Rings*—the unsanitized version—and intentionally actualizes it in the parallel universe (again, by capitalizing on the metaphysical anomaly). Let us also stipulate, however, that in Tolkien's novel there are *no final injustices* (i.e., there are no injustices that remain uncorrected at the end of the story) and there are *no gratuitous evils* (i.e., all evils are such that they are necessary to accomplish a greater good purpose from the author's perspective).²⁷ Thus, no final injustices and no gratuitous evils are actualized.

Should the author in Case 3 be morally condemned? It's far from obvious that he should. We've already seen that *intentional actualization* alone is no ground for condemnation. But then why would the presence of "bad things" in the (intentionally actualized) story render the author worthy of moral condemnation, especially if the story taken as a whole is a *good* story?²⁸ In fact, we can press the point further: if the story is an *exceedingly* good story, wouldn't it be even better if that story *were* intentionally actualized? Wouldn't it be better as a *true* story?²⁹

²⁷ Whether these conditions are met in Tolkien's actual story is beside the point. All that matters is that in principle they *could* be met. Note also that for an evil to be non-gratuitous, it need not *itself* serve some good purpose; it is enough that (1) the evil occurs because some good purpose cannot be accomplished *without* that evil occurring and (2) the 'badness' of the evil is sufficiently outweighed by the 'goodness' of the good purpose. One might think here of typical cases of "double effect" such as the surgeon who has to cause pain and scarring in order to perform a life-saving operation. I'm grateful to an anonymous reviewer for prodding me to clarify this point.

²⁸ By "good story" I don't mean merely an entertaining story, but rather one that is morally commendable (more precisely, a story for which its author deserves moral commendation).

²⁹ Cf. Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, 159.

Perhaps we can adapt an insight from St. Anselm’s *Proslogium* here.³⁰ If existence in reality is greater—all else being equal—than existence merely in the mind, would it not follow that a good story existing in reality is greater than that same story existing merely in the mind?

The actuality objection to the authorial model maintains that the intentional actualization of a story in which characters commit evils and suffer harms would render the author of the story morally culpable. The three key ingredients here are (1) the actualization of the story, (2) the intentionality of the actualization, and (3) the presence of “bad things” in the story. But the cases considered thus far indicate that none of these factors *as such* warrants the moral condemnation of the author. The burden lies with the objector to explain why these three ingredients *in combination* imply that the author is morally suspect.

Case 4: Tolkien’s LOTR Intentionally Actualized and Maximized

It is now but a simple step to complete the four-case defense of the authorial model. Case 4 extends Case 3 such that Tolkien’s novel, rather than narrating merely a portion of a world and its history, depicts an entire world-history. The story in Case 4 specifies everything with the degree of detail that a doctrine of meticulous providence entails—that is to say, it specifies a possible world or maximal state-of-affairs.³¹ I contend that if the author is morally blameless in Case 3, there is no reason to think that the author wouldn’t be morally blameless in Case 4. After all, Case 4 is just an expanded version of Case 3. The differences are quantitative, not qualitative. Every relevant feature of Case 3—including no final injustices and no gratuitous evils—applies also to Case 4, only on a larger scale. But this fourth case is essentially the authorial model of divine providence.

³⁰ “For, it is one thing for an object to be in the understanding, and another to understand that the object exists. . . . Hence, even the fool is convinced that something exists in the understanding, at least, than which nothing greater can be conceived. For, when he hears of this, he understands it. And whatever is understood, exists in the understanding. And assuredly that, than which nothing greater can be conceived, cannot exist in the understanding alone. For, suppose it exists in the understanding alone: then it can be conceived to exist in reality; which is greater.” Anselm, *Basic Writings: Proslogium, Monologium, Cur Deus Homo, and Gaunilon’s In Behalf of the Fool*, trans. Sidney Norton Deane, 2nd ed. (La Salle, IL: Open Court Publishing Company, 1962), 7–8.

³¹ Strictly speaking we should exclude the author and his writing from the scope of the possible world to avoid problems of infinite recursion. Compare: when God actualizes a possible world, he doesn’t thereby actualize himself and his actualization of that world, except in a logically trivial sense.

Our Tolkien has become a God-like author; he stands in a relationship to his creation that is tightly analogous to God's relationship to his creation according to the authorial model. If 'Tolkien' in this final case is morally blameless, then the actuality objection fails, and the authorial model has been vindicated.

5. Objections

No doubt some objections will have been raised in the minds of readers regarding the success (or otherwise) of the four-case defense. In this section, I respond to five objections that have been leveled at the argument.

Objection #1: No Free Will or Moral Responsibility

Some readers may be tempted to say that what is morally objectionable about Case 4 (and indeed Cases 2 and 3) is that the characters in the actualized story *lack free will and moral responsibility* because their actions have been entirely 'scripted' from the outset. This complaint has some force on the face of it, but note several things. In the first place, the objection seems to assume incompatibilism, i.e., that free will is incompatible with determinism. If incompatibilism is false, the objection has no teeth. Assuming compatibilism, we can simply stipulate that in Cases 2 through 4 any compatibilist conditions for free will and moral responsibility are preserved (e.g., that the characters in the story exercise reasons-responsive guidance control over their actions).³² In the case of divine authorship, presumably God can ensure that these conditions are fulfilled as part of the story.

Secondly, it's not obvious that the four-case defense presupposes compatibilism about free will. Recall that the authorial model could be just as well endorsed by Molinists (who affirm libertarian free will) as by Augustinians. The 'actualization' in Cases 2 through 4 could be cashed out in terms of "weak actualization" (non-deterministic) rather than "strong actualization" (deterministic).

³² For an overview of contemporary compatibilist accounts, see Michael McKenna and Derk Pereboom, *Free Will: A Contemporary Introduction*, Routledge Contemporary Introductions to Philosophy (New York: Routledge, 2016), 178–231.

Thirdly—and most significantly—we should recognize that this objection is an entirely *different* one than the objection the four-case defense is designed to address, viz., the actuality objection. The actuality objection is that the authorial model of divine providence makes God the “author of evil” in some sense inconsistent with God’s perfect goodness or righteousness. It focuses on what the authorial model implies about *God*, not what it implies about *us*. It has little if anything to do with whether God’s creatures are morally responsible for their actions. It may be that the authorial model raises problems for creaturely freedom, but that is beyond the scope of this paper, which is directed solely toward addressing the actuality objection and the charge that the authorial model renders God morally culpable for the evil in the world.

Objection #2: God and Creatures Exist in the Same Reality

A second objection to the authorial model can be expressed by way of a thought experiment. Imagine that Smith authors a story in which he shoots and kills his neighbor Jones. Smith then *intentionally actualizes* the story; he shoots and kills Jones in reality. It seems quite obvious that Smith cannot exonerate himself by appealing to the fact that he played an *authorial* role with respect to the events. Regardless of his authorial role, Smith and Jones *exist in the same reality*. Smith committed an evil *in the real world*. Likewise, the objection goes, God and his creatures *exist in the same reality* (unlike, say, Shakespeare and Duncan). If God were to author a story in which evils are inflicted on his creatures, and then actualize that story, he would be as blameworthy for those evils as Smith is blameworthy for the evil he inflicted on Jones. The fact that God also stands in an authorial position with respect to events is neither here nor there.

The objection fails in two respects. First, it fails to recognize the distinction between the author of a story and the characters in that story. Smith may have authored the story of Jones’s death, but when he actually killed Jones, he did so *as a character in the story*, not as its author. This is where the alleged parallel with the authorial model breaks down. For a genuine parallel, we would have to suppose that God authors a story in which God himself—as a character in the story—inflicts evils on other characters. But the authorial model *as such* implies nothing of the sort. There is a crucial difference between (a) God authoring a story in which evils are inflicted on his creatures (e.g., by other creatures) and (b) God authoring a story in which God (as a character) inflicts evils on his creatures.

This leads us to the second point of failure. Even if proponents of the authorial model wish to say that God appears as a character in his own story, they will also want to insist that whenever God acts as a character in the (actualized) story, God never does so in a way that is unjust or evil, even when those actions result in suffering for his creatures (i.e., for the other characters in the story).³³ Applying that stipulation to the story authored and then actualized by Smith, we would have to say that when Smith shot and killed Jones, he did so *justly* (e.g., as a legitimate act of self-defense or as a combatant in a just war). The objection considered here only has teeth against the authorial model if Smith acts *unjustly* in the story that he actualizes. But in that case, the objection simply begs the question against the proponent of the authorial model. The issue here isn't the *intentional actualization* of the story by its author, but rather the morality of the actions performed by the author *as a character in the story*.

Objection #3: The Authorial Model Does No Useful Work

A third objection runs as follows: It is not any feature of the authorial model, but rather the stipulation (in Cases 3 and 4) that there are *no final injustices* and *no gratuitous evils*, that does all the heavy lifting in exonerating the author of moral culpability for the evils in the actualized story. One way to see this is by considering a *fifth* case, identical to Case 4 but for the addition of *some* final injustices or *some* gratuitous evils. In this Case 5 we would be inclined to say that the author *is* morally blameworthy for actualizing his story. Hence, the difference between blamelessness and blameworthiness has nothing to do with his *authorial* position, but rather with the presence or absence of final injustices and gratuitous evils in the (actualized) story.

Several points can be made in response. First, it doesn't follow from the fact that the authorial model doesn't account for the difference between Case 4 and Case 5 that the authorial model *never* does any useful work in exonerating God from the charge of moral blameworthiness. Secondly, and relatedly, I suggest that the usefulness of the authorial model lies primarily in highlighting a crucial element of classical theism, viz., that the Creator and the creation do not exist and operate

³³ Christian proponents of the authorial model will certainly want to say that God appears as a character in his own story, on many occasions, and supremely in the person of Jesus Christ, the incarnate Son of God. A central theme of that Christian account, of course, is that Christ did not enter the story to inflict evil on his creatures, but rather to suffer evil inflicted upon himself in order to secure their salvation (Gal. 3:10–14).

on the same ontological level—and that ought to give us pause regarding any inference from <God actualizes a world containing evil> to <God is blameworthy for the evil in the world>. If we can recognize that Shakespeare is not blameworthy for the murder of Duncan, and that God’s relationship to the world (according to classical theism) is analogous to Shakespeare’s relationship to the ‘world’ of *Macbeth*, that gives us at least some grounds for doubting that God should be thought blameworthy for the evils perpetrated by his creatures. So the authorial model, on a first approach, does some useful work in addressing the “author of evil” charge against risk-free views of divine providence.³⁴

Thirdly, as noted earlier, the authorial model has *other* virtues that supply reasons to adopt it regardless of any utility it holds for rebutting the “author of evil” charge. Anyone who adopts the authorial model for those *other* reasons still has to face something like the actuality objection, and the four-case defense provides a useful rebuttal.

Finally, it is important to keep track of the dialectical context in which the four-case defense is situated. The dialectic begins with (1) the “author of evil” charge leveled against risk-free views of divine providence; this charge is then countered with (2) the authorial model; the success of the authorial model against the “author of evil” charge is then challenged by (3) the actuality objection; lastly, the actuality objection is neutralized by (4) the four-case defense of the authorial model. Suppose it turns out in the end that the authorial model is doing no useful *argumentative* work in this dialectic, because the advocate of risk-free divine providence can simply rebut the “author of evil” charge directly by insisting that in God’s providence there are no final injustices and no gratuitous evils, and thus no wrongdoing can be attributed to God. Even so, the authorial model might still have some *psychological* usefulness for ‘easing’ people into the risk-free providence view *who are not already committed to that view*. Perhaps those who already hold to a risk-free view have no need of the authorial model to alleviate concerns about the “author of evil” charge. But for those who harbor misgivings about the risk-free view due to the “author of evil” charge, the authorial model can perhaps serve as a kind of conceptual bridge: a ‘gangplank’ to assist in boarding the SS *Risk-Free Providence* that can be withdrawn once the passengers are on board. If so, I suggest that the four-case defense supplies a useful plank in that gangplank.

³⁴ For further discussion of this point, see Anderson, “Calvinism and the First Sin.”

Objection #4: Our Intuitions Change When We Make It Personal

Imagine that an angel appears to you and presents you with a book (or perhaps a set of golden plates) on which a detailed story has been written. On reading the story, you discover that it features *you* as a character, but in the story you and your loved-ones are the victims of a litany of evils that involve appalling physical, psychological, and spiritual suffering. (Readers are invited to fill in the details according to their own worst fears.) You are then told that the author of the story not only has the *power* to actualize this story but also *intends* to actualize it. Would you not protest in the strongest possible terms? Would you not endeavor to wrestle the book away from the angel and destroy it? And would you not feel *entirely justified* in doing so?

Speaking for myself, I suspect I would. It may be that when the evils in the story are personalized in this way, our intuitions regarding the blameworthiness of the author of the (intentionally actualized) story change dramatically. But this imaginary scenario leaves out an important aspect of the four-case defense, namely, the stipulation that there are no final injustices or gratuitous evils. Suppose that the angel, after revealing the story, not only assures you that there *are* no final injustices or gratuitous evils in the story, but also explains in some detail *how* that is the case (i.e., explains how any injustices will be finally corrected and how all the evils to which you will be subjected are necessary to accomplish some greater good). Isn't it plausible that your intuitions about the blameworthiness of the author would shift again? I'm not suggesting that your *unhappiness* about the story would be alleviated. But your unhappiness with the author and his story would not, in and of itself, justify a charge of wrongdoing against him.

In any event, it seems to me that an objective and rational evaluation of the authorial model (and whether it makes God blameworthy for the evils in the world) requires us to adopt something closer to a third-person outsider perspective on the author's intentional actualization of the story, rather than a first-person insider perspective. To use a courtroom metaphor: when the authorial model is put on trial, we should seat ourselves in the jury box, rather than in the plaintiffs' chairs.³⁵

One might object that this response violates the terms of the authorial model itself, for according to the model there is no 'objective' third-person perspective; there are only *subjective* perspectives, viz., the first-person perspective of the author (God) and the first-person perspectives

³⁵ Alternatively, we might place ourselves behind something akin to John Rawls' "veil of ignorance." We may take into account that we *will* play a role in the (intentionally actualized) story, but not *which* role we will play.

of the characters (us). There is no vantage point “outside the system,” as it were. If the characters’ perspectives are not the right vantage point for judging the author’s blameworthiness, that leaves only the author’s perspective—and what author would judge his own authoring to be unjust? How is this any different from a bare appeal (as favored by some classical theists) to “God’s mere good pleasure”?³⁶

This is not an unjustified concern. But to be clear, my point is only that the perspective of the characters is too limited and fallible to serve as a basis for judging the blameworthiness of the author and the merits of his story, all things considered. In speaking of an “objective and rational evaluation,” I have in mind something like a judgment by an ‘ideal observer’. Of course, when the authorial model is in the hands of a classical theist, the ‘ideal observer’ will—in the nature of the case—coincide with the ‘author’. There’s simply no way around that. But I suggest that we can still usefully distinguish between *God-qua-author* and *God-qua-ideal-observer*, just as we can usefully distinguish (in the Christian theistic version of the authorial model) between *God-qua-author* and *God-qua-character*.

Objection #5: Our Intuitions Change When Evils are Spelled Out in Detail

The fifth objection is closely related to the fourth. According to this objection, our intuitions only work in favor of the four-case defense if the evils in the story are left unspecified and treated “in the abstract.” Unspecified evils do not provoke the same reaction as specified ones. Once we start to specify the details of the evils in the author’s story, we are not so ready to absolve the author of wrongdoing in actualizing the story—especially when many of them turn out to be *horrendous* evils, evils that strike us as utterly appalling, incomprehensible, and senseless.

I cannot deny the force of this point, but in response I would urge the importance of establishing a level-playing field. Cases 3 and 4 stipulate that the story contains no final injustices or gratuitous evils. Thus, if we are going to fill in the details regarding the evils in the story, we must *also* fill in the details about *how those evils result in no final injustices and are necessary to accomplish some greater good*. That will be far from easy, if not altogether impossible, when the specified evils are based on real-world case, precisely because we do not have an author’s-eye perspective (which is to say, a *God’s-eye* perspective) on the horrendous evils we observe and experience in

³⁶ Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for pressing this point.

the ‘story’ of the real world. Thus, in order to allow the “no final justices and no gratuitous evils” element of the four-case defense to do its work, we must resist the temptation to start filling in the details of the evils that take place in the author’s story.

6. Conclusion

Some advocates of the risk-free view of divine providence, in response to the charge that it makes God the “author of evil,” have appealed to the authorial model of divine providence. One of the challenges to this move is the *actuality objection*: unlike the human author of a story in which evils take place, God *intentionally actualizes* his story and that makes him blameworthy for the evils that take place. In this paper, I have offered a four-case defense of the authorial model against the actuality objection, and I have rebutted five objections to the model and my defense of it. The challenge for the proponent of the actuality objection is to state *where* in the sequence of cases the author becomes morally culpable for the evils in his story and *why* moral culpability is introduced in that case (and not before).

I close with a purely anecdotal observation. Having presented the argument of this paper to two dozen (or so) philosophers and theologians, I have encountered a range of responses to it. All agree that the author is blameless in Case 1. But among those who reject the final conclusion of the argument, there is disagreement about where to “get off the bus.” Some find fault with Case 2, some with Case 2.5, some with Case 3, and some with Case 4. (Some object to *multiple* cases and for *various* reasons!) The conclusion I draw from such a range of responses is this: if there *is* a problem with the argument, it isn’t obvious *where* the problem lies.³⁷

³⁷ An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 2022 Carolina Analytic Theology Workshop (CATW). I’m grateful to Paul Manata and Greg Welty for conversations that provided the initial inspiration for the paper, and also to the participants at CATW and an anonymous reviewer for suggesting and sharpening the objections discussed in section 5.