

The Problem of Evil and the

Activity of God

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The Problem of evil, from Epicurus via Philo of Alexandria to today, has usually been presented in more or less the same way. We are generally offered three, sometimes more, propositions:

- 1 God is omnipotent
- 2 God is good/loving
- 3 Evil/suffering exists

and the suggestion is that these three propositions, although all believed by many religious believers to be true, are mutually contradictory. These are held to be contradictory because, 'if God exists, then being omniscient, he knows under what circumstances evil will occur, if he does not act; and being omnipotent he is able to prevent its occurrence. Hence, being perfectly good, he will prevent its occurrence and so evil will not exist'.¹ Professor Plantinga sees the problem in much the same kind of way: '... five propositions ... essential to traditional theism: a) that God exists, b) that God is omnipotent, c) that God is omniscient, d) that God is wholly good, and e) that evil exists ... each of these propositions is indeed an essential feature of orthodox theism. And it is just these five propositions whose conjunction is said ... to be self-contradictory'.² These writers are not unrepresentative of the vast numbers of philosophers who see, and try to solve, the problem in these terms.

The usual way to tackle the problem is to argue that it does not necessarily follow that an omnipotent being will want to prevent all evil/suffering, because the existence of evil/suffering is a necessary concomitant of a world in which free beings freely choose to worship a creator such as the one envisaged in the original problem, and the latter state of affairs is more desirable than one in which there are no free beings:

'A world containing creatures who freely perform both good and evil actions – and do more good than evil – is more valuable than a world containing quasi-automata who always do what is right because they are unable to do otherwise. Now God can create free creatures, but he cannot causally or otherwise determine them to do only what is right; for if he does so they do not do what is right *freely*. To create creatures capable of moral good, therefore, he must create creatures capable of

moral evil; but he cannot create the possibility of moral evil and at the same time prohibit its actuality. And as it turned out, some of the free creatures God created exercise their freedom to do what is wrong: hence moral evil. The fact that free creatures sometimes err however, in no way tells against God's omnipotence or against his goodness; for he could forestall the occurrence of moral evil only by removing the possibility of moral good'.³

Professor Swinburne sees the answer in much the same way:

'it is not logically possible for an agent to make another agent such that necessarily he freely does only good actions. Hence if a being G creates a free agent, he gives to the agent power of choice between alternative actions, and how he will exercise that power is something G cannot control while the agent remains free. It is a good thing that there exist free agents, but a logically necessary consequence of their existence is that their power to choose to do evil actions may sometimes be realized. The price is worth paying, however, for the existence of agents performing free actions remains a good thing even if they sometimes do evil'.⁴

I want to suggest, however, that this way of presenting the problem not only clouds the real issues involved but also creates more of a problem than it solves. I shall question some fundamental assumptions involved in the presentation of the problem in this way and attempt to show that, not only do they render the attempted solutions empty, but show that, if there is a problem of evil, it is not of the sort hitherto assumed to be the case. I do not claim to be presenting an argument that is in any way new or revolutionary; I am merely trying to tie together some loose threads that, as far as I am aware, have not been directly applied to the problem of evil in quite the way I shall now attempt.

The particular assumption with which I am primarily concerned is the way in which the presentation of the argument, as I have outlined it, entails certain notions of the way God has, or has failed, to act.

Let us consider the case of a small child suffering from an incurable disease. This, on the face of it, appears to be a prime example of the sort of evil that God is said to be responsible for not preventing (arch-'antitheodiscists' such as Professor Flew and Dostoyevski's Ivan Karamazov always appeal to such cases, no doubt because of their emotive force). But what would it be for God to actually prevent such an evil? I can think of the following as possible candidates for the class of events that might constitute God's prevention of the evil:

a) a direct and miraculous intervention whereby the laws of nat-

ure are contravened and the child is, as a result, healed.

b) the apparently natural remission of the disease which is construed as God's action.

I have argued elsewhere⁵ that there is no *logical* contradiction in either notion, but the question I want to consider here is just what sense can be made of them.

What sense can be made of a) in the context of the story we are considering? What would a miraculous intervention be in this instance? We are obviously not meant to construe God's intervention as akin to that of an invisible surgeon with infinite medical knowledge and powers, mending torn sinews, restoring damaged cells, in such a way that the human eye cannot see. Or are we? Does God really intervene in this fashion? Apart from the fact that I can make no sense of this sort of 'intervention' I can see other problems with it: in such a notion we seem to assume that God has good reasons for intervening in some cases but not in others. Suppose that the child in our example dies of this disease. Are we then to assume that God had good reasons for allowing the child to die? or, if you like, to die in pain and suffering? Well . . . what are the reasons? To impugn God's character by laying moral blame on him is to misconstrue the nature of God in the first place. It involves the question of whether it is logically conceivable that God is malicious. But the problem here, it seems to me, is not whether or not God has reasons to intervene in one case rather than another but what sense it makes to lay blame on God. Professor Flew puts the challenge thus:

'Now it often seems to people who are not religious as if there was no conceivable event or series of events the occurrence of which would be admitted by sophisticated religious people to be sufficient reason for conceding "There wasn't a God after all" or "God does not really love us then". Someone tells us that God loves us as a father loves his children. We are reassured. But then we see a child dying of inoperable cancer of the throat. His earthly father is driven frantic in his efforts to help, but his heavenly father reveals no obvious sign of concern. Some qualification is made – God's love is "not merely human love" or it is "an inscrutable love", perhaps – and we realize that such sufferings are quite compatible with the truth of the assertion that "God loves us as a father (but, of course, . . .)". We are reassured again. But then perhaps we ask: what is this assurance of God's (appropriately qualified) love worth, what is this apparent guarantee really a guarantee against? Just what would have to happen not merely (morally and wrongly) to tempt but also (logically and rightly) to entitle us to say "God does not love us" or even "God does not exist"? I therefore

put to the succeeding symposiasts the simple central question, "what would have to occur or to have occurred to constitute for you a disproof of the love of, or the existence of God?"⁶ But what is Flew asking for here? Reasons for evil or suffering? Those who are willing to answer questions such as this usually point to God's design and argue that, although we cannot be sure at present, present suffering will be explained in relation to this design when we are in a better position to appreciate that design (usually when we are dead!). This answer is both evasive and non-evasive. It is the latter in that it places the responsibility for evil/suffering squarely in God's lap – so to speak. It is the former in that the only chance one is given for being able to understand what circumstances mitigate our present malaise is in the here-after; which *could* mean we will never find ourselves in such a position where we will be able to understand the problem. Although such answers may be creditable in that, in one sense at least they directly attempt to answer the question, they are malicious in that we are left with the inescapable conclusion that the child's suffering is a part of a premeditated plan; a plan designed by God before all worlds began. And we can surely do none other than agree with Ivan Karamazov that if this is the price for truth (free-will, goodness, call it what you will) then the price is far too high. God's character is successfully impugned; he ceases to be worthy of worship. But answering the question in this fashion only goes to show that it is the wrong kind of question in the first place. The theist should not place himself in a position where he is forced to lay blame on someone's door.

Why should we feel we have to explain the cause of the cancer this child is suffering in terms of anything other than a medical explanation? We no longer have to explain the actions of the waves in terms of Poseidon's anger; we have a perfectly adequate explanation in terms of currents, tides, the earth's relation to the moon, etc. . . . Need we look for anything more? Why then do some feel the need to look beyond red and white corpuscles, tumours, damaged cells and the like to explain the cause of cancer? Cancer carries within itself the cause of its existence. Why, in this latter case, we should need to look beyond this to see it as an effect of some antecedently devised plan preordained by God (especially considering that we see no need to do this in the former case of the waves) is a great mystery to me.

I am led by these considerations to conclude that view a), which construes God's intervention as somehow direct and miraculous, not only makes very little sense as a notion of the action of God, it leads to the point where its protagonists find themselves embroiled in arguments about how to mitigate God from the blame

for these very interventions they are trying to explain. Not only is this notion of blame for evil/suffering one which makes little sense, it is also one with morally disastrous consequences for God.

Those who wish to follow path b) also encounter difficulties. Suppose that, as I suggested in b) above, the child recovers against all odds. Does it make sense here to say that God has intervened? Yes, in a way it does. There is nothing inherently contradictory in construing this as an act of God. But the *philosophical* problem here is what it *means* to say God has healed the child. In addition to facing the difficulty of showing why God chose to save *this* child and not others, it also raises the problem of showing how this particular event qualifies as an act of God. What is it for this event to have religious significance? It might be suggested that an event such as this is consistent with the supposed nature of the deity, or, alternatively, that it occurs in a context which is specifically religious. How then can the believer show that the nature of God, with which these events are thought to be consistent, has been revealed? The revelation cannot easily be said to issue itself in like events, for that would end in a quandary of circularity: the religious significance of other events cannot be adduced in support of event x to show that x is consistent with the nature of God because it is precisely the religious significance of *any* event that is in question here. But at what point in the 'healing' does it make sense to say 'God did this' or 'Unless God did things this way we would not have had the resultant healing'?

In a case such as the one we have been considering God's activity is apparent because the event excites us, or causes wonder, or because the event is inexplicable in medical terms. However, inasmuch as all events may, on the theistic conception of things, be related to the divine providence, all events may in one way or another be said to be the action of God; and insofar as this may excite, amaze, or prove inexplicable, then all acts may be called the action of God. That is, both the resurrection of Jesus and the falling of rain could, on this view, be called acts of God.

Recent attempts in theology to escape the action of God as apparently arbitrary and sporadic interventions in the history of the world have resulted in the idea that everything is an act of God. But if God's action is applicable to every class of events and, in some cases, to every thing, then the words 'God's action' seem to me to have lost any substantive content either as that which excites wonder, on the one hand, or as individual enough to be construed as the separate class of acts, called 'God's acts', on the other.

Professor Holland tells the story of a small child riding a toy motor car.⁷ He strays on to an unguarded railway crossing. The child on the track is obscured from the view of the driver in the

approaching train. The train, however, comes to a halt within a few feet of the child. But there was nothing supernatural about the manner in which the brakes of the train came to be applied: the driver had fainted and this was due to an exceptionally heavy lunch and a quarrel he had with a colleague, which in turn had caused a rise in his blood pressure. From this story of coincidences Holland concludes:

'Unlike the coincidence between the rise of the Ming dynasty and the dynasty of Lancaster, the coincidences of the child's presence on the line with the arrival of and then the stopping of the train is impressive, significant; not because it is very unusual for trains to be halted in this way, but because the life of the child was imperilled, and then, against expectation preserved. The significance of some coincidences as opposed to others arises from their relation to human needs and hopes and fears, their effects for good or ill upon our lives. So we speak of our luck (fortune, fate, etc.). And the kind of thing that, outside religion, we call luck is in religious parlance the grace of God or a miracle of God . . . But although a coincidence can be taken religiously as a sign and called a miracle and made the subject of a vow, it cannot without confusion be taken as a sign of divine interference with the natural order'.⁸

If events admit of natural or historical explanation yet are called 'miracles' or 'acts of God' then their only claim to fame as a class of events which are different from others will be that they are wondrous, or exciting, or coincidental. Such an arbitrary criterion for the evaluation of an event to be subsumed under such a class leaves the door wide open to all kinds of events very vaguely construed as such. For example, how would one determine which events are wondrous, exciting, coincidental *enough* to qualify as acts of God? Nor can it be sustained, as Holland contends, that the significance of an event called 'miraculous' or 'act of God' is so because of the relation it bears to human needs, hopes, and fears. The general relation of so many events, both wondrous and not so wondrous, to so many human aspirations and needs (which may be called luck, fate, coincidence, etc.) would suggest that there are other criteria by which an event is construed as an act of God.

So then, we find that on b), claims to identify God's activity have either ended up as vacuous or meaningless. At the other extreme, if God's activity is indistinguishable from the daily vicissitudes of life then the theist is going to have a hard time showing that, like Schleiermacher and Spinoza before him, he is not embracing some form of pantheism.

My conclusion then is that the problem of evil is only a problem if it is constructed in such a way that entails a notion of God's

power and goodness which is unworkable. The solution involves a radical restructuring of the idea of God's power and goodness but not one, I suggest, which is inconsistent with the idea of God's power and goodness found in the biblical paradigms of faith.

Consider the story of Job.⁹ Job suffers the most tragic of evils and, if anyone can be, he should be in a position to blame God for his non-intervention; that is, if he were to attribute goodness to God by an intervention in the course of events in his life. Yet this is not Job's reaction. He says: ' . . .the Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord' (chap. I, verse 21). This shows that for Job the notion of God's goodness and power is not dependent on the way things have happened to him. In other words, he does not utilize the course of events as an explanatory hypothesis for God's existence. Phillips notes:

' "The Lord gave" – Job could not say *why* things had gone well for him, things could have gone otherwise. In saying "The Lord hath taken away" Job is stressing that he cannot say *why* things went badly either. One can ask, "Why did the medical operation fail?" or "Why did the aeroplane crash?" and often intelligible answers can be given. One can ask, "Why are things as they are?" but there is no explanatory answer. The way things go is beyond one's control, so to ask the question "Why?" in the face of it is to ask a question which has no explanatory answer.'¹⁰

A correct conception of man's dependence on God, such as that found in Jesus' prayer 'Thy will be done', is not to be found in the view entailed by the 'posers' and 'solvers' of the traditional problem of evil. However, just what this notion of dependence and its concomitants of God's power and goodness is will have to be considered at another time.

- 1 'The Problem of Evil' by R. Swinburne, p 81 in *Reason and Religion*, ed. S. C. Brown, Cornell Univ. Press, 1977.
- 2 'The Freewill Defence', pp 105-106 in *The Philosophy of Religion*, ed. B. Mitchell, OUP, 1971.
- 3 Op. cit. A. Plantinga, p 106.
- 4 Op. cit. p 85.
- 5 I have considered the notions of miracles as violations and as coincidences in two papers: 'Miracles and Violations', *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, Vol XII, No 4, and 'Miracles and Coincidences', *Sophia*, (forthcoming).
- 6 'Theology and Falsification', pp 98-99 in *New Essays in Philosophical Theology*, ed. A. Flew and A. MacIntyre, SCM, 1955.
- 7 'The Miraculous', in *Religion and Understanding*, ed. D. Z. Phillips, Blackwell, 1967 pp 155-170.
- 8 Op. cit. pp 156-156.
- 9 This part of my argument is, as is much of my thought on this subject, largely dependent on my teacher's, D. Z. Phillips's writings and personal teaching. See, especially in relation to the story of Job, *The Concept of Prayer*, pp 98 ff, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1965, and 'The Problem of Evil', in *Reason and Religion*, op. cit.