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The Problem of Evil: Ethical Considerations

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THE PROBLEM OF EVIL is a logical difficulty which involves ethical problems. These ethical problems arise from the interpretation of the practical implications of "evil" as an ethical term. It is with these ethical problems that this paper will be primarily concerned.

The problem of evil is to be set out as a dialectic between theist and critic, the aim being to reveal the place of ethical judgments in the theist's apology. The validity of the inferences made must not be neglected, however, since the success or failure of the whole theistic enterprise will early be seen to depend upon it. For this reason, concessions will have to be made to the theist's apology in order to arrive at the more interesting arguments in their logically proper order. These are the more interesting arguments, I think, because their soundness is to be decided upon ethical grounds. Accordingly, I set myself two tasks in this paper: (1) To discover what ethical judgments, both normative and descriptive, are implicit in the theist's use of his premises as good reasons, and where his reasoning goes astray. (2) To suggest what ethical judgments, in contrast to the theist's, *are* supported by good reasons. We shall begin the analysis with the attempt to understand the problem.

Given the fact of evil in the world, the problem arises from the conjunction of two attributes—omnipotence and benevolence—taken by the theist to be defining properties of God. For, to quote Augustine, "Either God cannot abolish evil or he will not: if he cannot then he is not all-powerful; if he will not then he is not all-good." This problem arises only for one who takes these properties to be defining characteristics of God, and only if this position is intelligible. But the intelligibility of these properties, "omnipotent" and "benevolent," is a question which needs looking into. That is, we must first ask what kind of question it is with which we are to concern ourselves.

The difficulty here is that we have no clear idea of what the word (apparently a proper name) "God" stands for. We have no extra-linguistic means of finding out. This leaves us with linguistic descriptions, including "infinite being," "creator of himself," "personal being," "transcendent being," "omniscient," "omnipotent," and "benevolent." We may contend that we know what each of these terms means, but do we know what they come to in conjunction, indeed that they come consistently to one referent at all? In any event, we do not know whether they have a referent, nor do we know what would count toward affirming or denying many of these "predications."

Briefly, we may conclude from this that a question of the sort "Can there be an omnipotent and benevolent God when there is evil in the

world?" is not a factual question, since its terms fail at empirical description. But this is not to say that the question is unintelligible. For, as Ziff has shown,[1] we *do* know how to interpret these "predications" consistently when they are taken one at a time.

By ascribing omnipotence to God, we are saying that he is all-powerful, that there is nothing that he cannot do. To which we should add, trivially, that what is self-contradictory cannot be predicated of anything since nothing is described, and that the "ability" to do the logically impossible is not an ability but a confusion. We might, therefore, make some sense of "God is omnipotent" and establish a criterion by saying of any complete and correct description of an ability which is not self-contradictory that such a description applies to God.

The property of benevolence appears to be simpler, inasmuch as we have clear instances of limited benevolence in common experience. This appears to be a matter of taking instances of the best intentions in human experience and adding to them the notions of best *possible* intentions (perfectly good) and of having *always* the best possible intentions (wholly good).

Thus, if we are to make sense of the locution "God is omnipotent and benevolent," we must understand it to mean that God is completely unrestricted in acting upon intentions that are nothing less than morally perfect. As to how we are to understand the subject "God," how he may be said to "act," and how we are to understand his having "intentions," we are as much in the dark as before. All we have said is what is given by the terms "omnipotent" and "benevolent"; we have merely made their limited import explicit by transforming them into tautologies. Inasmuch as we have necessarily been able to analyse only their syntax and not their semantics, we must assume, if we are to operate with these terms at all, that their transformations are synonymous.

If we are correct so far, we should be able to state the problem of evil in its most fundamental form. We can infer from what is given that were God to create beings (that this is actually the case is part of what the theist is committed to defend), he would create morally perfect beings. Now, since God is himself "a being than which nothing greater can be conceived," and this means nothing greater morally, he would create only duplicates of himself were he to create at all. We might conclude that the fact that man does not measure up to the attributes predicated of God is the problem of evil.

The trouble with this, it is argued, is that "God" is further defined as "an infinite being without origin," and as "the creator of himself," and so is unique. But this proves only that we should call his creations "$God(s)_2$," distinguishing them from "God_1," where only God_1 is "without origin" and "the creator of himself."

1. Cf. Paul Ziff, "About 'God,'" *in* Sidney Hook (ed.), *Religious Experience and Truth* (New York: New York University Press, 1961), pp. 198ff.

When this does not do, the theist will further stipulate that "being the ground of the world" is also part of the meaning of "God." He will insist that the "God" we describe must be a "different God." Indeed! How could an omnipotent and benevolent God and a God who is the creator of the world be the same God?

I have argued thus to show how many concessions one must make to the theist to get to common experience, and how one is in no wise required to make them. Most arguments on the problem of evil consist of disputes over whether or not this world can plausibly be held to be the best of all possible worlds, and the only logical reason there seems to be for holding that these arguments may be inconclusive is the (necessary) fact that we know of no other worlds. The point is that, where God is concerned, there can be no such thing as "brute fact," absolved from theistic justification. We have only the linguistic terms and the logic of language with which to work, and it seems that with these alone we come swiftly to a certain conclusion.

If we make these concessions, the problem of evil turns on the balance and relation of good and evil in the world as it actually is. The theist is committed to maintaining that the balance of good over evil in the world is as favourable as it *logically* could be.

To lend plausibility to this defence, a distinction is made between "first-order goods" and "second-order goods." First-order goods are simple pleasures and (unearned) happiness. Standing in contrast are the first-order evils of pain and misery. The theist then argues that there are more important goods, second-order goods of sympathy, helpfulness, heroism—in general, of *kindness*. It is argued that these second-order goods are *logically* dependent on first-order evils and that their value is such as to outweigh the first-order evils that generate them. In this argument, the theist attempts to demonstrate that evil is a logically necessary ingredient in God's recipe for greatest good. He can then, neatly, label God's intention "third-order good"—the intention to maximize the all-important second-order goods.[2]

If this is God's scheme, we must surely judge it imperfect since most frequently first-order evils fail to generate second-order goods. Then too, second-order goods would not, it seems, require first-order evils of such severity. These objections, however, are open to rejoinders that would involve us in relatively fruitless speculation. More importantly, we might question whether second-order goods really do presuppose first-order evils.

It is incontestable that acts of heroism, for example, require first-order evils. But let us look more closely at this relation. We value heroism for

2. First-order goods are not necessarily left out of the scheme; the theist could say that they are present to mitigate the direct effects of first-order evils as far as possible without nullifying the efficacy of first-order evils in making second-order goods possible. They have their own value, of course—a value that is heightened by contrast with first-order evils, etc.

two reasons: first, for the saving of human life involved therein, and secondly, for the hero's display of kindness in the face of great risk to himself. If there were no first-order evils, no dangers, we could not value these things. But, it does not follow that there would be no kindness. It is logically possible that everyone should always be kind to everyone else—at no risk to himself or to anyone else.

That this situation would be better than the actual state of affairs is patent. For no one who is not psychotic values the endangering of human life merely for the glory possible in heroism. It is far better to have kindness without, rather than in spite of, mortal danger. If there were no dangers and no evils of any kind, there would still be kindness. For in that case, *all of our behaviour would be kind behaviour.*

It is only trivial, and no objection, to point out that in such a state of affairs, we should not speak of *kind* behaviour, for we would have no instances of any unkind behaviour. To say in any given context that a quality is undifferentiated is not to say that it is non-existent. In the perfect state of affairs here described, the statement "Man is kind" would be pointless. But, in the actual state of affairs, the statement "In the perfect state of affairs, man would be kind" is much to the point. Thus, if we can speak of a world where kindness is the rule, we can speak of a world in which there is no evil. In such a world we would not lose the second-order good; rather, we would avoid the risk of generating first-orders evils for ourselves in the trial of our second-order goods. Again, we must concede our objections for the sake of argument.

The theist, though, is not even justified in stopping at second-order goods. What of second-order evils? What of callousness, malevolence, cowardice—of *cruelty* in general? It seems that these second-order evils are more than adequately evil to offset the second-order goods. And they are probably more common too. If second-order goods are the important goods, then second-order evils are the important evils.

Thus the theist's argument is reversible. We can argue, and with greater plausibility, that God is malevolent: second-order goods are required for the sake of second-order evils, etc. This can be carried out to at least one more stage where we distinguish third-order good (forgiveness for second-order evils) and third-order evil (unforgiveness; or ingratitude for second-order goods).

It is at this point that freedom is appealed to in justification of second- and third-order evils. God gave men free will, runs the argument, and that necessarily means that man can choose evil as well as good. If man is free, it is he and not God who must be held responsible for evil. God is responsible only for creating man with free will, and he did so because it is better that men should act freely and sometimes err, than that they should be puppets acting rightly in a wholly determined way.

There are two premises in this argument that are doubtful at best: (1) that second-order evils are logically necessary preconditions of freedom,

and (2) that freedom may be considered as a third-order good superior to first- and second-order goods.

The notion of evil being necessary as a precondition of freedom suggests that the freedom referred to is not merely freedom of choice, but metaphysical freedom from all causation. For the theist must maintain that God made men as they are, and at the same time, that he is not responsible for what they do. It follows that what God is responsible for, viz. man's character, cannot determine his actual choices. But if freedom is randomness, and therefore unreliable and unpredictable, how can it be the *summum bonum*? The theist's argument depends upon an equivocation of "freedom": in one sense "freedom" signifies openness to all possibilities; in the other it signifies the ability to act upon one's own intentions. The first denies any meaningful connection between the agent and "his" act; the second affirms this connection as the highest good.

The identification of freedom with random action leads the theist's argument into what Mackie has called the "Paradox of Omnipotence."[3] If God made men free in the sense that he cannot control their actions, this is to say that he is not omnipotent. We may ask, "Can God make things which he cannot subsequently control?" If it is admitted that God *can* make rules that necessarily bind himself, he is not omnipotent. If it is admitted that God *cannot* make rules that necessarily bind himself, he is not omnipotent. That we have an intelligible logical disjunction here that is logically false implies either that God is necessarily not omnipotent, or that the notion of omnipotence is an unintelligible one; in either case it amounts to the same thing: unqualified omnipotence cannot be intelligibly ascribed to any agent. Thus, if God is an agent, he is not omnipotent; and if God is not an agent, he did not create man. It makes no sense to ascribe qualities of action to him, and theism is false.[4]

Thus, the notion of freedom as random action, far from solving the problem of evil, is incompatible with God's omnipotence. A deterministic account of freedom, however, *is* compatible with God's omnipotence.

A paradigm case of free action demonstrates that to act freely is to act *with* cause, but *without* coercion. Flew offers as such a case the choice of marriage of two normal young people, where neither has been hypnotized; each person's choice is reasoned rather than compulsive, and there is no question of "having to get married."[5] This account of freedom leaves open the possibility that God created men's characters and is thereby responsible

3. Cf. J. L. Mackie, "Evil and Omnipotence," in N. Pike (ed.), *God and Evil* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1964), pp. 57ff.

4. If the theist drops the argument in terms of freedom, his theodicy comes to the same paradoxical conclusion. It is argued that evil is necessary for good, not as a counterpart but as a means. This means that God is restricted by a *causal* law, and therefore is not omnipotent. Or, since God is held to be the maker of causal laws, it comes to the question whether God is able to bind himself by rules, i.e. to the "Paradox of Omnipotence."

5. Cf. Antony Flew, "Divine Omnipotence and Human Freedom," in A. Flew and A. MacIntyre (eds.), *New Essays in Philosophical Theology* (London: S.C.M. Press, 1955), pp. 149ff.

for their actions, without doing violence to notions of free choice and free action.[6]

In the light of this account of freedom, the problem of evil can be expressed as follows:

> If God has made men such that in their free choices they sometimes prefer what is good and sometimes what is evil, why should he not have made men such that they always freely choose the good? If there is no logical impossibility in a man's freely choosing the good on one, or on several occasions, there cannot be a logical impossibility in his freely choosing the good on every occasion.[7]

One might ask what is the difference between one's always freely choosing the good and one's not being free. We might answer that we could always choose the good and still be *able* to choose evil. We could appeal to experience: we do not feel ourselves less *able* to do evil with increase of instances of our doing good. We could choose evil if we so willed; but we do not have actually to will it to prove that we are unrestrained. We conclude that God, if he were omnipotent and benevolent, would have created men who always freely choose the good, and that he could have done so (1) without man's actually choosing evil, i.e. second-order evil, and (2) without first-order evils, since they are not needed for second-order goods or for freedom. It remains to defend this position.

It has been questioned whether a determinist can explicate the notion of "always freely choosing the good." Ninian Smart writes:

> An indeterminist may simply say that it might have been the case that men were always wholly good. But the determinist can only make sense of this possibility on the assumption that wholly good men would have a causal difference from men as they are. In order to imagine a man's always overcoming his harmful inclinations, he must surely imagine some change in the way his personality is built. But we have no assurance that some *unspecified* causal change would leave men more or less human and yet produce the consequence of complete goodness. Hence the change has to be specified. I have tried out a plausible fiction or two here, to show that so far one can assign no clear content to the possibility of men's being built wholly good. But maybe some determinist will dream up a plausible fantasy to establish his point. But let him do so: for so far the Utopia Thesis is wrapped in cloud.
>
> Again, it might be argued, from the side of theism, that this discussion works against angels just as much as it works against the possibility of wholly good men. If we cannot make some sense of noncosmomorphic worlds we cannot make sense of angelic worlds. Maybe so: though angels, qua messengers of God, could share in the intelligibility of God. But that takes us too far afield.[8]

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6. The question of whether or not man is responsible for his actions is not directly relevant to the problem of evil. However, if one holds a consistent deterministic view and also holds that God did in fact (initially) create men's characters, it would follow that man is *not* responsible for his actions. For his actions would not rest ultimately upon his, but upon God's free choice—God being the only agent to have created his own character, and therefore the only being ultimately responsible for his own behaviour.
7. J. L. Mackie, "Evil and Omnipotence," p. 56.
8. N. Smart, "Omnipotence, Evil and Supermen," in N. Pike (ed.), *God and Evil*, pp. 111f.

We have already attempted to outline an answer to Smart's question in terms of the possibility of man's choosing evil, while he would in fact always choose the good. In fact, the determinist does not have to "dream up a plausible fantasy to establish his point"; he needs only to demonstrate that it is *logically* possible, and not *causally* possible. If it is logically possible, God should have made it causally possible. How could this possibility be represented deterministically? Mackie answers that God could have made man such that he is tempted by evil, but always manages to resist that temptation.

> Professor Smart never considers this possibility, though it would have been the most natural universalisation of the traditional concept of moral goodness. . . . Does he think that "resisting temptation" is a concept inconsistent with the determinism he is assuming in this discussion? If so, he is not taking determinism seriously, for resisting temptation is a real species of experience of which determinists must give some account.[9]

This is to say that God could have created man so rational that, even though man can choose evil, man in fact always chooses the good. Man's always freely choosing the good would then be a law, but like a law of nature, a descriptive and not a prescriptive one. It may be objected that such rational creatures could not be called "men"(!), but if so, it proves only that God should have created *them*, and not men.

The theist cannot consistently reject a Utopia which is but a poor approximation of his own "Kingdom of God" or "Heaven." If the latter is intelligible, so, *a fortiori*, must the former be intelligible. The theist can hardly admit that "angelic worlds" are unintelligible without admitting that his talk of God is equally unintelligible. It is especially incongruous to admit that this "takes us too far afield," inasmuch as the intelligibility of God—his "omnipotence" and "benevolence"—is precisely the root of the problem of evil.

Thus, in questioning how men may intelligibly be wholly good, the theist questions the intelligibility of making that predication of God. We can only understand the term "good" by human paradigms; thus, if "God is benevolent" is intelligible, as it must be for the sake of theism and the argument under discussion, "man is benevolent" must be intelligible too. If the theist finds no inconsistency in God's being wholly good and yet omnipotent (i.e. *free* to do any act), he cannot find any inconsistency in man's being wholly good and yet free. If anything, we have the better of the argument, since we can explain man's being wholly good and yet free in terms of resisting temptation, while the theist is hardly likely to say the same of God. Moreover, the theist must explain these two attributes of God in conjunction with the rest (e.g. transcendence). The theist, therefore, in the very act of describing God, assumes more than we need to assume to refute him.[10]

9. J. L. Mackie, "Theism and Utopia," *Philosophy*, 27 (1962), p. 155.
10. It has sometimes been assumed that the theist's attribution of omniscience to God leads to fatalism and precludes the theist's appeal to man's freedom. That omniscience

We may, however, feel that if our choices are determined by our character, and our character is determined by God, we are really only God's puppets after all. It can then be argued that it is better to have "free will" than to be a wholly good puppet. The trouble with this argument is that the notion of "free will" contained in it is indefensible. God or no God, our actions are ultimately determined by our characters, and neither we nor any other person determined our characters. Still we are free in the sense that we can do what we will to do, and what we do is *our* act. Whether the character from which it springs is God-determined or not does not affect our freedom. The paradigm case of free action demonstrates that we need only be free of the coercion of other agents in order for our action to be called "free" and for it to be *our own* action. If all men's actions are always determined by God, then any action is as "free" or as "determined" as any other, the meaning of "free" does not change, and there is, therefore, no reason for denying that in these circumstances man is still free. It only bothers the theist that, in this description, man is not free in *relation to God*.

But this should not bother the theist since, if God is omnipotent and benevolent, his concern for man's welfare would seem to require his intervention to prevent evil. The theist denies this because he maintains that freedom—including freedom from God!—is the *summum bonum* and evil is a small but necessary price to pay for it. He never explains, however, why freedom is of such surpassing importance, nor why man's being wholly good together with the *illusion* of being free to do evil will not do.

All that the theist says in this regard is that it is better that goodness (or "virtue") be attained after a genuine personal struggle, and this would not occur if man were not free and if there were no evil. But in the first place, it is doubtful whether "virtue" can be attained only by personal struggle, and in the second place, if this were true it would be another causal law leading back to the Paradox of Omnipotence.

What all this indicates is that the theist places too high a value on freedom —a value so high as to beg the question of whether this is the best of all possible worlds. However we resolve the linguistic issue of whether a man who always chooses the good can be called "free," this will not settle the question of the *summum bonum*. If the matter comes down to deciding which is better, evil with freedom, or goodness without freedom, we may, I suggest, decide for the latter.

Let us grant that God made us such that we are "of necessity" wholly

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does not entail fatalism, or even "foreknowledge," has been shown by A. N. Prior. This issue is a logical one, namely, that of "whether what is the case *has always been going to be the case*." Cf. A. N. Prior, "The Formalities of Omniscience," *Philosophy*, 27 (1962), p. 118. Prior argues that "God is omniscient" means "It is, always has been, and always will be the case that for all p, if p then God knows that p," and that this does *not* entail "For all p, if p, God has always known that it would be the case that p," but merely entails that "If, at any time, it was the case at that time that it would be the case that p, then God knew at that time that it would be the case that p" (p. 117). In other words, "God is omniscient" means that God knows all there is to know, but this does not include what cannot be known, namely, present knowledge of future contingencies.

good, and that we are not free to do evil. If we are wholly good, completely happy, for what do we require freedom? Certainly "free to do evil" is not part of the meaning of "happy." Freedom is a means, the *summum bonum* is an end. In the actual world, freedom is necessary for the *summum bonum*, and it is for this reason that it is so highly valued. But if we already had all possible goods in fullest measure, we would no longer need to prize our freedom. Because of the evil in the world, freedom is necessary if man is to struggle to live the good life; take away that evil, and man is already living a better life. Thus, there is no logical necessity for us to lose our chance at happiness when we lose our freedom, if that very happiness is already ours and necessarily so.

In the state of moral perfection, second-order goods would be impossible because their end, kindness, would already have triumphed. In valuing these moral goods so highly, the theist misses the point. Their purpose is to achieve a better world—a world in which there is less need for second-order goods. If the theist were right, we should be thankful for each first-order evil since it makes second-order good possible, and we should value second-order good in itself. But the goodness of second-order goods does not consist in this; rather, it is precisely the opposite: it consists in our readiness to lessen the number and force of first-order evils. The theist's argument is immoral. The more one values second-order good, the more one is *opposed* to first-order evil.

The theist asks us which is better, total freedom or total goodness. We must answer that total goodness is better. For if a man were *morally good* and *totally free*, would he not try to use that freedom to assure the total goodness of himself and others? He would want to assure the freedom of others, but only when this was conducive to their goodness. Would he not punish his child when necessary, and, in general, restrict his child's freedom in order to teach his child goodness? Can we, then, expect any less of an omnipotent and benevolent God? If it is a moral use of our freedom, in fact a second-order good, to limit the freedom of others in the interests of the utilitarian principle, we can expect no less, and much more, of God.

The theist's appeal to freedom, then, admits of an easy *reductio ad absurdum*. He leaves open the logical possibility that all men should always will what is evil—and still commits himself to arguing that a world full of completely evil men possessing "free will" is really the best of all possible worlds.[11] Thus we see that personal struggle and the freedom necessary for it are means not ends. If there is some extra good in the goodness won after a hard and painful struggle, God cannot be restricted from conferring *that* good upon us too.

Of course, in refuting the theist's appeal to freedom, we are in no wise required to give up freedom altogether in order to make our point. Man is not actually free in respect of many things—things that he cannot actually do. We might simply ask the theist how much freedom a man must have

11. Cf. H. J. McCloskey, "God and Evil," in N. Pike (ed.), *God and Evil*, p. 78.

to be free, or not to be free. It then becomes immediately apparent that this question can be answered only in relation to the particular context.

It will then be seen that freedom is compatible with less evil and even with no evil, and that God would have to answer to this. The way in which an omnipotent and benevolent God would both preserve our freedom and still maximize our goodness is then clear: he would simply *replace* the abilities that we now have to do evil with new abilities that we do not now have for doing good.