

The Problem of Evil

i. Introduction

The existence of evil in the world is regarded by most atheists as the principal objection to the existence of God, called by the Roman Catholic theologian Hans Küng the ‘rock of atheism’. By ‘evil’ is meant the fact of pain and suffering and the ‘problem’ that it poses for religious belief is not hard to see. How can evil exist in a world created by an omnipotent and omni-benevolent God? For the positive atheist this question exposes an insuperable inconsistency within religious belief, thereby invalidating the claim that any God exists. Nor, I should add, is discussion confined to the philosophical literature: the Old Testament deals with it in the Old Testament book of *Job*, as do numerous works of fiction, three of which should be mentioned in particular: Primo Levi’s *If this is a Man* (1947) Albert Camus’ *The Plague* (1948) and Fyodor Dostoevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880), the last-named providing perhaps the most famous and haunting exposition of the problem ever written.¹

To clarify the issue at hand, evil is further and traditionally subdivided into two types: 1) there is *natural* or *non-moral* evil; and 2) there is *moral evil*. Non-moral evil refers to suffering due to natural calamities, that is, to events outside man’s control, i.e., through earthquakes, hurricanes, floods, disease etc. A classic example of such phenomena is the Tsunami of 2004, which killed approximately 225,000 people in eleven countries. Historically, however, the most significant of such events was the Lisbon earthquake of 1755, in which perished or were injured 90,000 people out of a total population of 230,000. The fact that this happened in a Catholic country, on the day of a Catholic festival, and that it destroyed all the churches in the capital gave to the event a particular theological and philosophical resonance, with far-reaching cultural implications. For Voltaire it was sufficient to cure him for ever of any lingering optimism that this was, after all, ‘the best of all possible worlds’; a suggestion he attacks in his *Poème sur le Désastre de Lisbonne* (1756) and ridicules in his play *Candide* (1759).

¹ See *TAC*: 152-161.

But we have come across natural evil before, although admittedly not on such an immediate and dramatic scale. Darwin's theory of natural selection charts a process of unparalleled brutality, haphazard in operation, and subject only to the vagaries of environment; and his analysis of the evolution of new species under such adverse conditions was sufficient to undermine Darwin's religious beliefs. William Paley, we recall, thought he could resolve the difficulty: the calamities that occur within the natural world may be construed as instances of the watch going wrong. But this is to miss Darwin's point: these cruelties are part and parcel of the mechanism of the watch. *This is how the watch works* – as he makes clear in a letter to Asa Gray:

An innocent and good man stands under a tree and is killed by a flash of lightning. Do you believe (and I should really like to hear) that God *designedly* killed this man? Many and most persons do believe this; I can't and don't. If you believe so, do you believe that when a swallow snaps up a gnat that God designed that that particular swallow should snap up that particular gnat at that particular instant? I believe that the man and the gnat are in the same predicament. If the death of neither man nor gnat are designed, I see no reason to believe that their *first* birth or production should be necessarily designed.²

Natural evil lies outside human control but moral evil is the direct result of it. Here the suffering produced is a consequence of individual or collective action, i.e., killing, war, mental and physical torture etc. The classic example of this type of evil is the Nazi programme during the Second World War, known as the 'Holocaust', in which six-million Jews perished – an act of such incomparable brutality that it has tended to obscure other examples of genocidal suffering: in Turkey (1915-1918: 1,500,000 Armenian deaths); in Bosnia-Herzegovina (1992-1995: 200,000 Muslim deaths); in Rwanda (1994: 500,000 Tutsi deaths) and more recently in the Dafur region of Western Sudan (from 2003: 450,000 deaths). To these events we must add those in which the distinction between moral and non-moral evil is less clear-cut, in which human and non-human acts conspire to produce the resulting catastrophe. An example of this is cyclone Nargis that hit Burma in May 2008. Estimates put the number of dead or missing at over 140,000: a figure undoubtedly increased by the reluctance of the ruling military junta to call in emergency aid.

Any theistic attempt to resolve the alleged incompatibility between the existence of God and the existence of evil is called, following

2 *The Life and Letters of Charles Darwin*, ed. Francis Darwin, John Murray, 1903, Vol. 1, p.315.

Leibniz, a *theodicy* (from the Greek, *theos* [God] + *dike* [justice] and down the centuries many classic theodicies have been offered. Some of these may be discarded from the outset. The first two I should like to mention resolve the problem of evil by evading it altogether, that is, by the simple expedient of denying one of its components: that no evil exists or that no omnipotent God exists. The first alternative is found, for example, in the teachings of Christian Science. The founder of the movement, Mary



Mary Baker Eddy

Baker Eddy (1821-1910) maintained that disease was unreal and the product of ignorance. 'Evil is but an illusion, and it has no real basis. Evil is a false belief, God is not its author'.³ Since, however, the belief that suffering was an illusion carried with it the further belief that disease was unreal, this teaching was medically hazardous and had disastrous consequences for many of its adherents: unsurprisingly membership of the sect has declined rapidly. Nor, indeed, does the claim that evil is an illusion resolve anything. For if evil is the product of ignorance and illusion, then such ignorance and illusion remain the evils incompatible with God's omniscient goodness. The second alternative, admittedly, has more mileage. This is the Manichaean heresy of di-theism, which appeared in Persia in the second century and which takes its name from its founder Mani (c. A.D. 215-176). This asserts that evil is the product of a struggle between two non-omnipotent powers, the one good and the other evil, neither of which can overcome the other. It was, however, Augustine of Hippo (354-430) who, despite his own initial membership of the sect, denounced the belief as a 'shocking and detestable profanity', one which must necessarily impugn the rule of God as the universal and sole sovereign of creation. While modern theologians have almost totally rejected the claims of a supernatural evil being (Satan) as the source of evil, it is worth noting that recent so-called 'process' theologians, most notably Charles Hartshorne (1897-2000), have resolved the dilemma along not entirely dissimilar lines, admittedly rejecting any personification of evil but also denying traditional concepts of divine omnipotence.⁴

3 *Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures*, Boston, Mass., 1875, p.480.

4 See Hartshorne, *Omnipotence and other Theological Mistakes*, Albany, State University of New York Press, 1984.

Two further theodicies deserve special mention. The first is the *punishment theodicy*, by which God allows or brings about evil as a punishment for wrongdoing. Closely allied to the biblical account of original sin, and mythologically expressed in the *Genesis* account of the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden, this argument, as an article of faith, provides no satisfactory explanation of the original motive to sin and has unacceptable moral implications by making the distribution of suffering disproportionate, visiting the sins of the guilty parents upon their innocent children and thereby undermining the notion of a just God. By advocating retribution for sins committed, the theory is indiscriminate in its application, meting out punishment to those who have committed no crime or are incapable of doing so – e.g., those too young or too mentally deficient to take any moral responsibility for their actions – and in so doing employs a system of justice that our own courts would find repugnant.

The second theodicy has been mentioned briefly already. This is the ‘best of all worlds’ theodicy, associated with the philosopher and mathematician Gottfried Leibniz (1648-1716). Like Augustine before him, Leibniz begins with the claim that the world is the creation of an omnipotent and perfectly good God. This is developed into the parallel assertion that, being good, God would be contrary to his own nature if he did not create the best world possible. Or: the mind of God, like some vast calculating machine, is alone capable of surveying the infinite variety of possible worlds and, being good, has necessarily selected the best, that is, a world admittedly containing evil, but only that amount which is indispensable for the creation of the best possible world. Leibniz’ reasoning here is that a world with evil may be better than one without evil, and that, just as in mathematics, ‘an imperfection in a part may be necessary for a greater perfection in the whole’. As to the question of God’s culpability for moral evil – namely, that God could have prevented suffering but does not – Leibniz introduces the notions of antecedent and consequent will. The former will is the divine will for good – e.g., that men should not sin – and the latter God’s permitting will – e.g. that men should be allowed to sin for ‘superior reasons’. Leibniz’ point is that the creation of the best possible world can only be achieved within the context of the imperfections of his creatures. Thus the best plan of the universe must embrace certain evils, these ‘disorders in the parts’, that enhance the ‘beauty of the whole’.

This argument, already ridiculed by Voltaire, is philosophically demolished by David Hume in his *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (1779), to which we have already referred. Leibniz’ argument is that what evil there is in the world must be both necessary and unavoidable. But

this argument fails if it can be shown that not all evil is either essential or necessary. And this Hume proceeds to do in a section entitled 'The Four Circumstances of Evil'.⁵ 1) We are told that pain acts as a warning-device, making all creatures 'vigilant in the great work of self-preservation'. But the same could just as easily have been achieved by a 'diminution of pleasure', prompting men and animals alike 'to seek that object, which is necessary to their subsistence'; 2) Pain is also assumed to be an unavoidable by-product of natural laws



Gottfried Leibniz

that overall produce beneficial results; but here too the slightest intervention by a benign deity would have created an immeasurably happier world, one in which, for example, ships would always reach their destinations, or good rulers would always enjoy sound health and a long life. 'A few such events as these, regularly and wisely conducted, would change the face of the world'. 3) A similar adjustment could be made in the powers and faculties of all animals, including men and women. The human species, for instance, although in bodily advantages the most deficient, is distinguished by a capacity to reason; why not, then, additionally increase our powers of concentration, capacity for work, levels of intellectual ability or talents for friendship? Again, the benefits from such slight modifications would be incalculable. 'But it is hard; I dare to repeat it, it is hard, that being placed in a world so full of wants and necessities; where almost every being and element is either our foe or refuses to give us their assistance; we should also have our own temper to struggle with, and should be deprived of that faculty which can alone fence against these multiplied evils'. 4) Finally, and most decisively, Hume points to those evils that arise from 'the inaccurate workmanship of all the springs and principles of the great machine of nature'. Here it is all a question of degree. For while it may be accepted that such things as wind, rain and heat are necessary for the maintenance of life, why is it that all these things, by excess or defect, can become so quickly the cause of ruin and misery: the wind the hurricane, the rain the flood, the heat the drought?

5 *Op.cit.*, pp. 204-211.

Hume's detailed catalogue of suffering makes Leibniz' solution to the problem of evil quite unacceptable as an explanatory hypothesis. For in each of the examples given by Hume the slightest alteration would greatly decrease the quantity of evil without affecting the desired quantity of good. And these examples place the theist in a difficult position: he or she must now show a justifying purpose for such suffering, and explain why suffering, Hume's examples notwithstanding, remains an indispensable component of the divine creation, and why an omnipotent and benevolent God did not choose other means of bringing about the same results. For Hume himself, if the goodness of God cannot be established *a priori*, then it must be established *a posteriori*, that is, on the basis of the empirical evidence before us; and here the evidence points away from any theistic explanation but rather to Hume's own preferred choice: of human beings at the mercy of an atomistic, epicurean world indifferent to whatever good or evil may exist within it.

Look round the universe. What an immense profusion of beings, animated and organized, sensible and active! You admire this prodigious variety and fecundity. But inspect a little more narrowly these living existences, the only beings worth regarding. How hostile and destructive to each other! How insufficient all of them for their own happiness! How contemptible or odious to the spectator! The whole presents nothing but the idea of a blind nature, impregnated by a great vivifying principle, and pouring forth from her lap, without discernment or parental care, her maimed and abortive children.⁶

With these failed theodicies behind us, let us now return to the main debate. Modern commentators usually distinguish between two versions of the problem of evil: 1) the *logical form*: that the existence of evil is logically incompatible with God's existence; and 2) the *evidential form*: that, while not logically incompatible with the existence of God, the sheer weight and variety of suffering in the world make religious belief untenable.

ii. The Logical (or Deductive) Argument from Evil

This argument claims that there is a logical incompatibility between the existence of suffering and the existence of a being who in the Judaeo-Christian tradition is defined as possessing certain attributes, namely, omnipotence and omni-benevolence. The argument runs as follows: 1) If God, who is a benevolent and omnipotent being, exists, there would

⁶ *Ibid.*, p.211.

be no evil; 2) Evil exists; therefore 3) God does not exist. Lucretius, in his *De Rerum Natura*, cites Epicurus as the first exponent of a deductive argument from evil – hence this objection is sometimes called the ‘Epicurean paradox’ – but it is to Hume again that we must look for the most famous exposition. So in the *Dialogues* he writes: ‘Epicurus’ old questions are yet unanswered. Is he [God] willing to prevent evil, but not able? then he is impotent. Is he able, but not willing? then he is malevolent. Is he both able and willing? whence then is evil?’⁷ Any confidence that Hume



J.L. Mackie

may have had that the logical problem would remain unresolved was, however, premature. This is because the leading modern exponent, the Australian atheist J.L. Mackie (1917-1981) acknowledged that this objection had been successfully refuted by an American, the Christian philosopher, Alvin Plantinga (b.1932). So important is this debate that some brief account must now be given of it.

Mackie presents his argument in an essay ‘Evil and Omnipotence’, which appeared in the journal *Mind* in 1955.⁸ According to Mackie, the simplest form of the problem of evil – that God is omnipotent and wholly good, yet evil exists – does not bring out the full force of the contradiction. Mackie therefore introduces two further principles or ‘quasi-logical rules’ to show more precisely where the contradiction lies. His argument runs as follows: the problem of evil can only be resolved if at least one of these five propositions is jettisoned.

- 1 God is omnipotent: i.e., there are no limits to what an omnipotent being can do
- 2 God is wholly good: i.e., a wholly good being is opposed to evil in such a way that it eliminates evil as far as it can.
- 3 God is omniscient: i.e., if evil exists or is about to come into existence, then an omniscient being knows that it exists or is about to come into existence.
- 4 Evil exists.
- 5 God exists.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p.198.

⁸ Vol.64, pp. 200-212. The essay is reprinted in *The Problem of Evil*, ed. Marilyn McCord Adams and Robert Merrihew Adams, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1990, pp.25-37.

When this occurs, however, the proposed solution is 'definitely fallacious'. Mackie reviews four such alternatives: that 1) 'Good cannot exist without evil' or 'Evil is necessary as a counterpart to good'; 2) 'Evil is necessary as a means to good'; 3) 'The universe is better with some evil in it than it could be if there were no evil'; and 4) 'Evil is due to human freewill'. It is the last of these to which Mackie devotes most attention; and rightly so because this introduces us to the first of the two great theodicies with which believers have traditionally defended their position. This is commonly called the *Free Will Defence*, according to which evil derives from the God-given ability of human beings to choose between good and evil acts.

Classically stated by Augustine of Hippo, in its usual formulation the Free Will Defence purports to be an explanation of moral and not non-moral evil – for many the Achilles heel of the argument, to which we shall return. The claim is that, despite the possibility of misuse, God gave humans the ability to make choices because a world with free choices is more desirable than one without them. It is this argument that Mackie challenges on the grounds that God could have created human beings with free will but *who were yet incapable of doing wrong*.

I should ask this: if God has made men such that in their free choices they sometimes prefer what is good and sometimes what is evil, why could 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. God was not, then, faced with a choice between making innocent automata and making beings who, in acting freely, would sometimes go wrong: there was open to him the obviously better possibility of making beings who would act freely but always go right. Clearly, his failure to avail himself of this possibility is inconsistent with his being both omnipotent and wholly good.⁹

The objection to this hypothesis, which Mackie has in part anticipated, is that there is a contradiction in saying, on the one hand, that God has made us so that we must always act in a certain way, and, on the other, that we are also genuinely free and morally autonomous individuals. One cannot be both a mindless puppet and a free decision-making agent at the same time. But to this criticism Mackie has a reply. If it is being suggested that the moral freedom given by God to individuals is 'really free', then this must mean that God cannot control them and that

⁹ *Ibid.*, p.33.

therefore God is not omnipotent. What we have here, in other words, is an example of what Mackie calls the ‘Paradox of Omnipotence’: Can an omnipotent being make things which he cannot subsequently control? The most frequently quoted illustration of the paradox is the Paradox of the Stone: ‘Can God create a rock so heavy that he cannot lift it?’ This question, it would appear, cannot be answered in a way that is consistent with God’s omnipotence. For if we say that God can create a rock so heavy that he cannot lift it, then it must be conceded that God lacks the power to lift that rock; and if we deny that God can create a rock so heavy that he cannot lift it, then it must be conceded that God lacks the power to create that rock. Either way there is something that God cannot do.¹⁰

Mackie’s article of 1955 provided a core argument for philosophical atheists for the next twenty years – until, that is, 1974, in which year Alvin Plantinga published his *The Nature of Necessity* and his more accessible *God, Freedom, and Evil*. As Plantinga makes clear from the beginning, he is not, strictly speaking, engaged in a theodicy – a theodicy, to repeat, being an explanation for the presence of evil in a universe created by an omnipotent and perfectly good being – but in a *defence* against an alleged incompatibility between two propositions: these being 1) that an omnipotent and perfectly good being exists and 2) that evil exists. The consensus view is that in this Plantinga has succeeded, a philosophical defeat accepted by Mackie.

Mackie has argued that God did not take the logically possible option of creating human beings who always freely choose to do good. Plantinga replies that here Mackie is wrong to suppose that, since there is a *logically possible* world where free creatures always do good, God can *actualize* such a world. This is an example of what Plantinga calls ‘Leibniz’ lapse’: that God must necessarily be able to actualize *all* possible worlds. But this is not the case. For although omnipotent, God cannot do the

10 Following an important article by James Rachels, an interesting addition can be made to Mackie’s argument. A contradiction is said to arise from the conception of God as a being ‘worthy of worship.’ Since only a being with an ‘unqualified claim to our obedience’ is worthy of worship, the believer must be required to abdicate his autonomy or independent judgment. But since autonomy is an essential requirement of moral decision, no being who is worthy of worship can make this demand. Hence the contradiction within the ascribed property: either being a moral agent means that one cannot be a worshipper (i.e., subservient to God’s commands) or being a worshipper means that one cannot be a moral agent. See Rachels, ‘God and Human Attitudes’, *Religious Studies*, 7, 1971, pp.325-337. Reprinted in *Divine Commands and Morality*, ed. Paul Helm, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1981, pp.34-48.

logically impossible – for example, make $2+2=5$ or squares round – and significantly to allow free will while yet eliminating suffering is also to do what is *logically impossible*. Plantinga's reasoning is as follows. For God to create a world in which human beings always choose the good would be incompatible with freedom, i.e., God would be *causing* them to do it and would thus be imposing a limit on what was possible. If God causes X to do Y, then X is not free with respect to Y because he cannot choose not to do Y. Thus it is logically impossible for people freely to do what they are caused by God to do. Plantinga later extends this argument by introducing the notion of 'transworld depravity'. This involves the claim that in any possible world where a person is free, that person would, at some time or other, act wrongly. Since, however, it is further logically possible that everybody may suffer from transworld depravity, then it is logically possible that God cannot create free beings who always do what is morally right. These arguments, Plantinga claims, expose the weakness of Mackie's criticism. While it is logically possible for God to create a state of affairs in which free agents always choose the good, it is not logically possible to ensure that the good always comes about since that would be logically inconsistent with the freedom of the agents. Therefore the existence of at least some evil is logically consistent with the existence of God.

A world containing creatures who are sometimes significantly free (and freely perform more good than evil actions) is more valuable, all else being equal, than a world containing no free creatures at all. Now God can create free creatures, but he cannot cause or determine them to do only what is right. For if he does so, then they are not significantly free after all; they do not do what is right freely. To create creatures capable of moral good, therefore, he must create creatures capable of moral evil; and he cannot leave these creatures free to perform evil and at the same time prevent them from doing so. . . . The fact that these free creatures sometimes go wrong, however, counts neither against God's omnipotence nor against his goodness; for he could have forestalled the occurrence of moral evil only by excising the possibility of moral good.¹¹

Mackie, in his *The Miracle of Theism* (1982) concedes that Plantinga has shown how God and evil can co-exist – that he has successfully resolved a logical problem – but that the substantive issue still remains unanswered. After all, as Plantinga himself has made clear, a defence is not a theodicy, and the reason why evil exists at all still remains to be explained. God

11 *The Nature of Necessity*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1974, pp.166-167.

may not be the author of evil and cannot therefore be accused of ‘malice aforethought’; but he is still open to the charge of ‘gross negligence or recklessness’ in not foreseeing the consequences of creating free individuals. There thus remains what Mackie calls the problem of ‘unabsorbed evils’.¹² We may list some. Undoubtedly there are many evils – those in the moral category – which are due to human actions;



Alvin Plantinga

and the Free Will Defence may indeed go some way towards explaining why such things as cheating, lying, torturing and murdering occur in God’s creation. If people are autonomous moral agents, then it does seem plausible to claim that the gift of freedom enables people to commit such immoral acts. But it is difficult to see how this defence can explain evils in the non-moral category, of why God should allow so many human beings to be cheated of the benefits of life through no fault of their own and succumb to congenital defects, paralysis, insanity and the like. In what way will my moral autonomy be compromised if God tomorrow completely eliminated cancer? Of course, it could be argued that this is precisely what God is doing, as some kind of supervising editor of cancer research; but this is of little comfort to those already dead or dying. Plantinga’s own response at this point is hardly satisfactory: it is possible, he says, that such natural evils are produced by fallen angels, by Satan and his demonic cohorts; a suggestion that would convert natural evil into a form of moral evil. Well, certainly this remains a logical possibility. But the claim that non-moral evil is in fact moral evil perpetrated by non-human agents is very hard to take, and bears not only an unfortunate resemblance to an earlier argument in which Satan made an appearance, already discredited for impugning God’s sovereignty, but carries with it an unfortunate implication for Plantinga’s own argument. Plantinga has told us that evil is an unavoidable result of free actions: it is, as it were, the price of freedom, which is the greater good. Orthodoxy similarly ascribes the Fall of Satan to Satan’s own autonomous action, but now made irredeemably evil and incapable of ever producing good. Given this scenario it is difficult to see why God should allow this demonic figure to wreak such havoc while permanently denying to him alone the chance of ever redeeming himself, of ever exercising his choice for good

12 *Op.cit.*, p.176

which, we are assured, is a necessary element of autonomy. This is, it seems to me, no more than an inversion of Mackie's original hypothesis: that God has here created a being who acts freely but always goes wrong.

iii. The Evidential (or Inductive) Argument from Evil.

Whether or not we accept that Plantinga has provided a successful reply to Mackie, most philosophers now hold that the logical argument from evil is redundant. Accordingly a major feature of recent literature is the shift away from this argument and towards an evidential counterpart. This evidential argument proceeds on a different tack and presents an inductive or probabilistic argument for the non-existence of God: that the existence of evil provides *prima facie* reasons for the probability, if not the possibility, that no God exists. The major contemporary exponent of this objection is the American philosopher, William Rowe (b.1931), whose argument proceeds as follows:

- 1 There exist instances of intense suffering which an omnipotent, omniscient being could have prevented without thereby preventing the occurrence of any greater good.
- 2 An omniscient, wholly good being would prevent the occurrence of any intense suffering it could, unless it could not do so without thereby preventing the occurrence of some greater good.

Therefore,

- 3 There does not exist an omnipotent, omniscient, wholly good being.¹³

The question now is not whether the existence of God and the existence of evil are logically incompatible but whether particular instances of excessive and pointless suffering renders the existence of God less likely. Rowe has made famous the example of a fawn slowly burning to death in a forest fire, and he admits that it is possible that an omnipotent and benevolent God could have a reason for allowing such a terrible thing to happen. He also accepts that there may be cases of moral and spiritual development impossible without suffering, except of course that this is not the case with the fawn. For here we are dealing with a particular example of suffering which does not result in any greater compensating good, i.e., a case that is not the consequence of human choice, is excessive to a degree, produces no beneficial effects, and which a good and omnipotent being could have prevented, had he so wished. Rowe concludes that the failure to find a morally justifiable reason for such gratuitous suffering is sufficient evidence that there is no reason, and that accordingly it is unlikely that God exists.

13 *The Philosophy of Religion*, Belmont, California, Wadsworth, 1978, pp.86-94.

In emphasizing the evidential basis of atheism – that the variety and profusion of evil in our world provides rational support for unbelief – Rowe is returning us to the historical mainstream of the debate, according to which God’s non-existence can be assumed on the basis of certain empirical evidence. According to the atheistic authors thus far reviewed – from Lucretius down to Hume – the fact of gratuitous suffering, while it can be accommodated within the boundaries of an implacable and indifferent universe, cannot so easily sit within a world of divine



Percy Shelley

origin. The presence of evil testifies to the absence of God; or, if not to his absence, then to his presence as an incompetent villain of sadistic temper. Those who subscribed to such views, however, trod warily, given the likely repercussions for those concerned; and it comes as no surprise to discover, as we have seen already, that d’Holbach’s *System of Nature* (1770) should be published anonymously or that on advice Hume’s *Dialogues* of 1779 should appear posthumously. Another important example is of the poet Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792-1822), perhaps the most famous of all British atheists. Brought up in a conventional Anglican household, Shelley was sent down from Oxford in 1811 for publishing his pamphlet ‘The Necessity of Atheism’, later expanded into his more philosophically refined *A Refutation of Deism*, circulated privately in 1814. Here Shelley attacks the moral bankruptcy of Christianity, and in doing so provides an interesting twist to the evidential argument against God, namely, that his omniscience never extended to foreseeing what barbarities Christianity would perpetrate upon mankind.

I will admit that one prediction of Jesus Christ has been indisputably fulfilled. *I come not to bring peace upon earth, but a sword.* Christianity indeed has equalled Judaism in the atrocities, and exceeded it in the extent of its desolation. Eleven millions of men, women, and children, have been killed in battle, butchered in their sleep, burned to death at public festivals of sacrifice, poisoned, tortured, assassinated, and pillaged in the spirit of the Religion of Peace, and for the glory of the most merciful God.

In vain will you tell me that these terrible effects flow not from Christianity, but from the abuse of it. No such excuse will avail to palliate the enormities of a religion pretended to be divine. A limited intelligence is only so far responsible for the effects of its agency as it foresaw, or might have foreseen them; but Omniscience is manifestly chargeable with all the consequences of its conduct. Christianity itself declares that the worth of the tree is to be determined by the quality of its fruit. The extermination of infidels; the mutual persecutions of hostile sects; the midnight massacres and slow burnings of thousands, because their creed contained either more or less than the orthodox standard, of which Christianity has been the immediate occasion; and the invariable opposition which philosophy has ever encountered from the spirit of revealed religion, plainly show that a very slight portion of sagacity was sufficient to have estimated at its true value the advantages of that belief to which some Theists are unaccountably attached.¹⁴

Shelley is the most high-profile atheist of the early nineteenth century; but as the century advanced such views became more commonplace and more overt, largely as a result of the increasing Victorian conviction that all beliefs were fallible. This conviction carried with it the further demand only to assent to those propositions for which there was sufficient evidence. With the increasing professionalization of the scientific community, this demand became more insistent, and research proceeded into areas previously protected by religious authority, tradition and dogma. Darwin's investigations into the origin of species may have been the most prominent, but other researches, such as the geological exploration into the age of the Earth or the development of the theory of conservation of energy, only served to foster doubt on the literal inerrancy of scripture. The lawyer Sir James Fitzjames Stephen (1829-1894) argued that to assume that tradition, devoid of any evidential support, had any authority in religious matters was like 'keeping a corpse above ground because it was the dearest and most beloved of all objects when alive'.¹⁵ Other leading intellectuals of the period, such as Sir James' brother, the agnostic Sir Leslie Stephen (1832-1904) or the politician Sir John Morley (1838-1923) or the first atheist Member of Parliament Charles Bradlaugh (1833-1891) may have expressed themselves less picturesquely; but all were positively evangelical in their adherence to the evidentialist principle,

14 Quoted in *Varieties of Unbelief*, ed. J.C.A. Gaskin, New York, Macmillan, 1989, p.119.

15 Cited in Leslie Stephen, *The Life of Sir James Fitzjames Stephen*, London, Smith, Elder, 1894, p.370

classically defined by perhaps the most strident of their group, the mathematician W.K. Clifford (1845-1879): 'it is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence'.¹⁶ And in all these cases the existence of suffering, to which Victorian reforming and philanthropic sensibilities were particularly alert, provided the core evidence. If not alone sufficient to demonstrate the non-existence of God, it was sufficient to cast off a core belief, namely, the whole notion of a divine providence actively and beneficially engaged in human affairs. So writes the outstanding empiricist philosopher of this period, John Stuart Mill (1806-1873): 'Not even on the most distorted and contracted theory of good which ever was framed by religious or philosophical fanaticism, can the government of Nature be made to resemble the work of a being at once good and omnipotent'. Two decades later Mill's godson, Bertrand Russell (1872-1970), arguably the most high profile atheist of the twentieth century, was to echo Shelley's words: 'My own view on religion is that of Lucretius. I regard it as a disease born of fear and as a source of untold misery to the human race'.¹⁷



Irenaeus of Lyon

We have already considered the first major theodicy to attempt a resolution of the problem – the Free Will Defence – and have found this inadequate for a number of reasons, not least because it still leaves God implicated in the sufferings of humanity, either directly in the case of non-moral evil or indirectly in the case of moral evil. Let us turn now to the second great theodicy. Borrowing a phrase from the poet John Keats, this is usually called the Argument from Soul-Making. The principal contemporary exponent of this theodicy is the English philosopher and theologian John Hick (1922-2012), but the argument is an ancient one and looks back to the work of Irenaeus of Lyon (c.135-140-c.202), first Bishop of Lyons, and the most important theologian of the second century.

16 *Lectures and Essays*, New York, Macmillan, 1901, pp.163-176. Reprinted in *The Ethics of Belief Debate*, ed. Gerald D. McCarthy, Atlanta, Georgia, Scholars Press, 1986, pp.19-24.

17 'Has Religion made useful Contributions to Civilisation?' (1930). Reprinted in *Why I am not a Christian*, London, George Allen & Unwin, 1975, p.27.



John Hick

Irenaeus' argument is invariably presented as the great alternative to Augustine's theodicy. Although sharing with Augustine the view that evil occurs through the agency of human free will, Irenaeus argues that God, in choosing not to create a perfect world, requires imperfect man to struggle towards the finite 'likeness' of God. Instead of Augustine's doctrine that man incomprehensibly destroys his own created perfection – evil thus presenting a disruption of the divine plan – Irenaeus pictures man in the process of creation, as an initially immature creature seeking moral growth. Accordingly God is

implicated in the sufferings of the world: in enabling man to be free, God permits evil to occur as a necessary part of the environment in which moral maturity can be achieved.

In his classic study of the problem of evil – *Evil and the God of Love* (1966) – Hick's position emerges as an elaboration of Irenaean theodicy. The essential premise of his argument is that it was never part of the divine plan to create human beings in a state of perfection, as end-states existing in a paradise from which, according to the mythology of the Fall, they disastrously fell away. Rather, God's purpose was more teleological and developmental: to create individuals 'in process of becoming the perfected being whom God is seeking to create'.¹⁸ This progressive process, however, without which no spiritual or moral growth would be possible, is fraught with difficulties and dangers; and it is an environment in which the experience of suffering is an indispensable ingredient of the 'soul-making' enterprise, even to the point where, as Hick acknowledges, it can undermine religious belief altogether. But even this possible denial of God is part of God's plan: God is here deliberately hiding himself, creating an 'epistemic distance' between himself and individuals and refraining from giving too much knowledge of himself for fear that it would endanger the development of 'authentic fiduciary attitudes', in which individuals come to know God not out of necessity but freely. To the criticism (voiced already by Hume) that the amount of evil in experience far exceeds anything rationally required for such a programme, Hick employs his 'counterfactual

18 *Op.cit.*, Edition used, London, The Fontana Library, 1974, p.292.

hypothesis' or 'negative theodicy'. What would an 'hedonic paradise' be like? We can certainly imagine such a world: a world in which all possibility of pain and suffering is excluded, where no injuries are sustained, no crimes committed, no lies told or individuals betrayed. But it would also be a world bereft of any distinction between right and wrong, devoid of any wrong actions or any right actions in distinction from wrong. Indeed, it would be the worst of all possible worlds, converting a person-making environment into an uncreative and static one, in which moral attributes, such as generosity, kindness, courage and love, would have no place. If, to use the familiar analogy, God is to be represented as a Heavenly Father, wishing the best for his children, then this environment, in which pleasure becomes the sole value, cannot be the one best suited for the development of the most valuable potentialities of human personality.

It think it is clear that a parent who loves his children, and wants them to become the best human beings that they are capable of becoming, does not treat pleasure as the sole or supreme value. Certainly we seek pleasure for our children, and take great delight in obtaining it for them; but we do not desire for them unalloyed pleasure at the expense of their growth in such even greater values as moral integrity, unselfishness, compassion, courage, humour, reverence for the truth, and perhaps above all the capacity for love. We do not act on the premise that pleasure is the supreme end of life; and if the development of these other values sometimes clashes with the provision of pleasure, then we are willing to have our children miss a certain amount of this, rather than fail to come to possess and to be possessed by the finer and more precious qualities that are possible to the human personality. A child brought up on the principle that the only or the supreme value is pleasure would not be likely to become an ethically mature adult or an attractive or happy personality. And to most parents it seems more important to try to foster quality and strength of character in their children than to fill their lives at all times with the utmost degree of pleasure. If, then, there is any true analogy between God's purpose for his human creatures, and the purpose of loving and wise parents for their children, we have to recognize that the presence of pleasure and the absence of pain cannot be the supreme and overriding end for which the world exists. Rather, this world must be a place of soul-making. And its value is to be judged, not primarily by the quantity of pleasure and pain occurring in it at any particular moment, but by its fitness for its primary purpose, the purpose of soul-making.¹⁹

19 *Ibid.*, p.295.



J.S. Mill

Hick's argument is a major attempt to resolve the problem of evil; and it is worth mentioning that *The Encyclopedia of Unbelief*, which is understandably fairly dismissive of modern theology, praises Hick for his intellectual honesty and for providing the most formidable theodicy to date.²⁰ But it remains unsuccessful nonetheless, as, I hope, the following points will make clear. Hick's suggestion is that God's world has been in part designed for educational purposes, the aim here being the improvement of the moral

and spiritual health of the individual, a programme which would have no meaning in an hedonistic paradise devoid of any moral values. Given, however, that this educational device applies both to those who are spiritually healthy and unhealthy – that the bubonic plague does not discriminate – the application of suffering as an educational tool seems haphazard, to say the least, with no attempt being made to make the pain appropriate to the case at hand, to adjust the lesson to those who most need it. Indeed, there are some who appear to require no lessons at all, whose ease of life is presumably ill-adapted for any moral improvement. Nor indeed does the lesson seem appropriate to those incapable of learning anything at all. Given that the gorilla or the infant cannot appreciate the moral virtues like courage and self-sacrifice, it seems unfair that they should nevertheless have to undergo the sufferings which have proved so efficacious for the soul-making of others. In other words, if this is God's design, then it seems remarkably weighted against those who, through no fault of their own, are destined to learn no lessons through the pain they experience, who cannot turn to God because God is unknown to them. It also seems weighted against those with little time to spare for their education. People die young, with no chance to experience the full range of situations upon which

²⁰ *Op.cit.*, p.191. The entry article on Evil is written by a well-known critic of Hick, Peter H. Hare, who here duplicates the arguments already presented in 'A Critique of Hick's Theodicy', co-authored with Edward H. Madden, in *Evil and The Concept of God*, Springfield, Illinois, Charles C. Thomas, 1968, pp.83-90, 102-103.

their moral development depends. However, the most serious objection to Hick's proposal concerns the fact of 'dysteleological suffering', i.e., excessive pain, pain that is out of all proportion to any benefits that may accrue. In many cases, the suffering endured is so great that it does not edify but crushes the personality completely. Here evil does not result in good but in further evil. This point is made much of by John Stuart Mill (1806-1873), the outstanding representative of the empirical and liberal traditions of Victorian England.

. . . both good and evil naturally tend to fructify, each in its own kind, good producing good, and evil, evil. It is one of Nature's general rules, and part of her habitual injustice, that "to him that hath shall be given, but from him that hath not, shall be taken even that which he hath." The ordinary and predominant tendency of good is towards more good. Health, strength, wealth, knowledge, virtue, are not only good in themselves but facilitate and promote the acquisition of good, both of the same and of other kinds. The person who can learn easily, is he who already knows much: it is the strong and not the sickly person who can do everything which most conduces to health; those who find it easy to gain money are not the poor but the rich; while health, strength, knowledge, talents, are all means of acquiring riches, and riches are often an indispensable means of acquiring these. Again, *e converso*, whatever may be said of evil turning into good, the general tendency of evil is towards further evil. Bodily illness renders the body more susceptible of disease; it produces incapacity of exertion, sometimes debility of mind, and often the loss of means of subsistence. All severe pain, either bodily or mental, tends to increase the susceptibilities of pain for ever after. Poverty is the parent of a thousand mental and moral evils. What is still worse, to be injured or oppressed, when habitual, lowers the whole tone of the character. One bad action leads to others, both in the agent himself, in the bystanders, and in the sufferers. All bad qualities are strengthened by habit, and all vices and follies tend to spread. Intellectual defects generate moral, and moral, intellectual; and every intellectual or moral defect generates others, and so on without end.²¹

It would appear, then, that God's omniscience does not extend to a more precise calculation of where to draw the line, of 'fine-tuning' the dosage to achieve the best possible result. Once again, it is all a question

21 'Nature'. *Three Essays on Religion* (1874). For a modern edition, see Bristol, Thoemmes Press, 1993, pp.23-59. Also TAC: 161-174.

of degree. In the specific case of a child dying of cerebral meningitis, one must doubt whether the moral effects produced, such as sympathy for the cries of the child or for the anguish of the parents, could ever justify why the disease is there in the first place or why medical science should have so conspicuously failed to prevent it. It would be devilish to consider the moral gain sufficient compensation for the lack of treatment, and it is highly unlikely that any doctor, however philosophically inclined, would make this point to a bereaved mother. It may be, of course, that in these particularly harrowing cases, where the individual is simply overwhelmed by the pain he or she is experiencing, a divine plan is evident in the 'epistemic distance' it creates, even to the point that God is denied. Hick is clear that human beings are not to be made unambiguously aware of God's overpowering presence, which would place them in a kind of cognitive straightjacket, stifling freewill. But if this is so, the plan can hardly be considered a total success. Freedom and faith are here built on the back of God keeping himself very much to himself, of remaining hidden until certain individuals overcome their ignorance and come to believe. And this is undoubtedly the case for some. But for other individuals the hiddenness of God remains absolute, the excessive pain inflicted upon them obliterating any possibility that an omnipotent and benevolent God exists. Why God should have allowed this to happen is hard to see. Why did he not make himself better known to those in such distress, and thereby alleviate, if only in small measure, their suffering by at least giving some point to it by placing their experience within some kind of divine perspective? His failure to do this only makes his desire for anonymity inexcusable; and those who suffer can hardly be blamed for regarding their pain as being, after all, pointless, as bringing no benefit, and as providing thereby incontrovertible evidence that no good God exists. For why believe in a God as heartless as this?

Criticisms such as these have been widely canvassed, and Hick is well aware of them. Moreover, it is perhaps because he recognizes their force that, in the end, he takes refuge by appealing to 'mystery': the mystery, he writes, 'of dysteleological suffering is a real mystery, impenetrable to the rationalizing mind'.²² For one of Hick's critics, this remark smacks of surrender. 'Does one not detect', asks Roland Puccetti, 'a small white flag waving in the smoke there'.²³ Certainly this retreat into mystery resolves nothing but rather reduces the question before us – of why innocent and excessive suffering exists in God's world – to a question

22 *Op.cit.*, p.371.

23 'The Loving God: Some Observations on Hick's Theodicy', *The Problem of Evil*, ed. Michael Peterson, Notre Dame, Indiana, University of Notre Dame Press, 1992, p. 243.

with no discernible answer: a conclusion which leaves the field to the atheist. For if the answer, if answer there be, is indeed incomprehensible to the rationalizing mind, then it is hardly worth the asking, given that it will be unintelligible to those who asked the question. Putting the question thereby becomes no more than a rhetorical device. Thus against the evidential argument from evil the inscrutability of God is hardly the card to play. For this is not an explanation but an admission that no explanation will ever be forthcoming, or rather, that if it ever is we shall never understand it. In the absence of any confirming theistic explanation, the disconfirming atheistic explanation therefore stands alone; and in consequence the existence of suffering remains for many the decisive and unanswerable objection to the existence of God.

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