The Problem of Evil and Modern Philosophy — I

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I

God is all-powerful, all-knowing and perfectly good. But there is a great deal of evil in the world. People inflict suffering on others and on themselves. And there is suffering which is not caused by what anybody does. So must we not conclude that there can, after all, be no God? This question is an ancient one, but in what follows, I shall briefly try to indicate how it has been answered by modern philosophers of religion. Then I shall comment on the answers to which I refer.

II

One popular line of reasoning holds that in view of the existence of evil God's existence is simply disprovable. The charge here is that someone who believes in God is caught in a straight logical contradiction given that he also accepts that evil is a reality. Many modern philosophers take this line (which is, incidentally, sharply raised as a topic for discussion by St Thomas Aquinas in Question 2 of the First Part of the *Summa Theologiae*). H J McCloskey, for example, writes:

> Evil is a problem for the theist in that a contradiction is involved in the fact of evil, on the one hand, and the belief in the omnipotence and perfection of God on the other.[1]

The late John Mackie expresses a similar viewpoint. He says:

> . . . it can be shown, not that religious beliefs lack rational support, but that they are positively irrational, that the several parts of the essential theological doctrine are inconsistent with one another . . . In its simplest form the problem is this: God is omnipotent; God is wholly good; and yet evil exists. There seems to be some contradiction between these three propositions, so that if any two of them were true the third would be false. But at the same time all three are essential parts of most theological positions: the theologian, it seems, at once *must* adhere and *cannot consistently* adhere to all three.[2]

The claim here is that if God is omnipotent (all-powerful) and all good, then there could be no evil. Why not? Because, so the argument goes, if God is good he would obliterate or prevent evil if he were able to. And, since his omnipotence (the fact that he is all-powerful) means that he is able to obliterate or prevent evil, it follows that, given the fact of evil, God's non-existence is established.

529

But defenders of belief in God have not been prepared to regard this argument as conclusive. If there are certain good things or good states of affairs which could not come about without the existence of some evil, would it not follow that God could still be good and all-powerful and all-knowing? You cannot make an omelette without breaking eggs, and a cook who breaks eggs in making an omelette is not a bad cook just because he breaks the eggs. So might we not say that God, in creating, allows the existence of some evil without which there could not be certain goods? Several philosophers have argued that we can say this.

Much evil in the world is due to the actions of human beings. Torture is a good example. When considering such evil some philosophers have argued as follows: The evil that people perpetrate is indeed a bad thing. But much of it is brought about by the free decisions of human beings. Now God could, perhaps, have done something to prevent this evil. Or he could, maybe, step in to stop it now. But this would mean not creating a world where human beings have free will. And it is better that the world contains human beings with free will than that it should not contain such beings. And it is better that human beings should be allowed to exercise their freedom than that they should not. So human freedom is a sign of God's goodness. It does, however, mean that there will be the possibility of great evil brought about as a result of human freedom. This, however, is not God's fault. It is the fault of people who freely choose to bring about evil. And God's role with respect to their choices is that of one who permits them to occur. In one sense, therefore, we can rejoice in evil brought about by some human behaviour. We can see it as something tolerated by God in the course of his bringing it about that human beings exist with free will.

In reply to this argument it has been urged that God could have created a world in which people always freely do what is right. Thus, for example, John Mackie writes:

> If there is no logical impossibility in a man's freely choosing the good on one, or on several occasions, there can be no logical impossibility in his freely doing 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.[3]

But this reply has, in turn, been rejected, notably by Professor Alvin

Plantinga, who responds to it by appealing to a certain view of freedom, and by drawing on the notion of 'possible worlds', which play a great role in much modern philosophy. Roughly speaking, a possible world is a way things could have been. And, according to those who talk about possible worlds one can say things like 'There are many possible worlds', 'There is a possible world in which . . .', and 'God knows all possible worlds and can choose to create one'. Plantinga accepts this way of talking. He also holds that:

> If a person S is free with respect to a given action, then he is free to perform that action and free to refrain; no causal laws and antecedent conditions determine either that he will perform the action, or that he will not.[4]

Now Mackie's claim is that it is logically possible that all agents always freely choose to do what is good. One can put this by saying that, according to Mackie, there is a possible world in which all agents always freely choose to do what is good. One might therefore ask why God has failed to make actual (to actualize) that world rather than our world, the actual world. But how do we know that there are possible agents who, if actualized, always choose to do what is good? We might accept that there are plenty of possible worlds where people are free to do wrong but always do right. But could God have actualized them? Plantinga thinks the answer to this last question may be no. Let me now try to explain how his argument goes.

Let us suppose that we have a world in which everyone freely does what is right. This world is not the actual world, but it is a possible one. And we want to know whether or not God could have made it actual. Mackie seems to be saying that we know God could have made it actual, and that, since God has clearly failed to make it actual, then God is not good.

Now let us take one person in one possible world. We will call this person 'Egbert', and we will call our possible world 'Gamma'. So, in Gamma, Egbert always freely does what is right. But could God have actualized Gamma?

Suppose that Egbert exists both in Gamma and in the actual world. And suppose that in the actual world he freely does what is wrong on at least one occasion. In Gamma he does not go wrong; but if he does go wrong in the actual world then this, so Plantinga would say, has implications for what is true of Egbert in Gamma. It will, in fact, be true of him in Gamma that if he had been actual he would have freely done wrong at least once, namely on the occasion on which he did wrong in the actual world.

Now let us consider Egbert in Gamma at some particular moment when he is going right, when he is doing something good rather than something bad. Suppose if Egbert had been actual he would

not have done right at exactly the same moment. Then, in Plantinga's view, in Gamma at the moment in question it is true of Egbert that if he had been actual, then he would have gone wrong.

Could God have made Egbert actual without it being true that Egbert goes wrong on the occasion in question? Remember that at present we are assuming that if someone acts freely then no causal laws or antecedent conditions determine either that he performs his action or that he does not. In that case, however, the answer to our question is 'No' – or so Plantinga argues. God could not have made Egbert actual without it being true that Egbert goes wrong on the occasion now in question. Why? Because it is just true of Egbert that if he had been actual then he would have freely gone wrong. In Gamma he does not go wrong on the occasion in question. But it is true of him that he would have gone wrong on that occasion in the actual world, and he would have done so freely. So, Plantinga would say, if God makes Egbert actual, Egbert goes wrong unless God interferes with his action, in which case, on our present understanding of freedom, Egbert would not be acting freely.

So Plantinga would say that there is at least one possible world that God cannot actualize. He cannot actualize Gamma, which contains Egbert who in Gamma always goes right but who, if actual, would freely go wrong at least once.

But now, what if all the worlds that are not actual but which do contain people are like Gamma? Suppose they all contain someone who would, if actual, freely go wrong at least once? Then, according to Plantinga, God cannot actualize these worlds either. Yet it is, says Plantinga, possible that all merely possible worlds containing people are like Gamma in that they all contain someone who would, if actual, have gone wrong sometimes. And in that case, Plantinga thinks, it is perhaps not possible for God to actualize any world in which no people ever freely go wrong. In other words, the notion of an agent freely choosing to do something cannot, for Plantinga, be separated from the fact of his actually choosing, and, while it is possible that an agent should do right on every occasion, it is outside God's control whether or not he actually does so when actualized. God might cause an actual agent to behave well on all occasions. But that agent will not be free if his freedom depends on there being no causal laws or antecedent conditions determining his choice of action. Or, as Plantinga says himself in summing up his position on God and freedom:

> The creation of a world containing moral good is a co-operative venture; it requires the uncoerced concurrence of significantly free creatures. But then the actualization of a world W containing moral good is not up to God alone; it also depends

on what the significantly free creatures of W would do if God created them and placed them in the situations W contains. Of course it is up to God whether to create free creatures at all; but if he aims to produce moral good, then he must create significantly free creatures upon whose co-operation he must depend. Thus is the power of an omnipotent God limited by the freedom he confers upon his creatures.[5]

So Plantinga is saying that if there is to be freedom it may be impossible for God to avoid certain kinds of evil. This point of view is sometimes referred to as 'the Free-Will Defence', and though I have only shown how the defence is elaborated by Alvin Plantinga, it is fair to say that many pro-theistic philosophers of religion accept some version of it.

IV

Often, however, they have wanted to add to it. The Free-Will Defence tries to show how the evil that men and women do freely can be reconciled with the existence of an all-powerful and good God. But much evil is not the result of what men and women do freely. Take, for example, sickness which causes pain but which cannot, as far as we know, be prevented or cured. Is not this kind of thing proof that God cannot exist? Not according to some philosophers. The examples I take here are John Hick, whose book *Evil and the God of Love*[6] is already considered a modern classic, and Richard Swinburne, who has recently produced a much admired defence of belief in God derived from his Wilde Lectures given in Oxford a few years ago.[7]

Both Hick and Swinburne accept the Free-Will Defence. Both suppose that human freedom is a good thing and that much evil is to be attributed to it. But Hick and Swinburne also think that some account can be given of non-human-inflicted suffering. And they think that in the light of this account we can reply to the charge that the existence of evil proves the non-existence of God. According to Hick, the adverse conditions which we find in the world allow us to develop and to become more mature in our relationship with God. Hick writes:

My general conclusion is that this world with all its unjust and apparently wasted suffering, may nevertheless be what the Irenaean strand of Christian thought affirms that it is, namely a divinely created sphere of soul-making . . . Let us suppose that the infinite personal God creates finite persons to share in the life which He imparts to them. If He creates them in his immediate presence, so that they cannot fail to be conscious from the first of the infinite divine being and glory, goodness and love, wisdom, power and knowledge in whose presence they are, they will have no creaturely independence in relation to their Maker. They will not be able to *choose* to worship God,

533

or to turn to Him freely as valuing spirits responding to infinite Value. In order, then, to give them the freedom to come to Him, God creates them at a distance – not a spatial but an epistemic distance. He causes them to come into a situation in which He is not immediately and overwhelmingly evident to them. Accordingly they come to self-consciousness as parts of a universe which has its autonomous structures and 'laws' . . . A world without problems, difficulties, perils, and hardships would be be morally static. For moral and spiritual growth comes through response to challenges; and in a paradise there would be no challenges. Accordingly, a person-making environment cannot be plastic to human wishes but must have its own structure in terms of which men have to learn to love and which they ignore at their peril.[8]

Swinburne's view is rather similar. Like Hick, he thinks that the evils in the world provide various opportunities which would be impossible in the absence of the evils. For example, says Swinburne, natural disasters provide opportunities for the development of human knowledge of the universe and its operations, a development which, in the conditions under which it occurs, is both desirable and such that it could not come about without the evils on which it depends. He writes:

If men are to have knowledge of the evils which will result from their actions or negligence, laws of nature must operate regularly; and that means that there will be what I may call 'victims of the system' . . . *if* men are to have the opportunity to bring about serious evils for themselves or others by actions or negligence, or to prevent their occurrence, and if all knowledge of the future is obtained by normal induction, that is by induction from patterns of similar events in the past – then there must be serious natural evils occurring to man or animals.[9]

So in Swinburne's view, natural evils allow us to develop in our knowledge of the way the world works, and as a result of the knowledge we acquire we have the opportunity to do good or harm, and to do so freely and in the realisation of what we are about. And Swinburne thinks that this is a good thing.

There must be naturally occurring evils (i.e. evils not deliberately caused by men) if men are to know how to cause evils themselves or are to prevent evils occurring . . . Thus we know that rabies causes a terrible death. With this knowledge we have the possibility of preventing such death (e.g. by controlling the entry of pet animals into Britain), or of negligently causing it. Only with the knowledge of the effects of rabies are

534

such possibilities ours. But for us to gain knowledge of the effect of rabies it is necessary that others die of rabies (when the rabies was not preventable by man), and be seen to have done so. Generally, we can only have the opportunity to prevent disease affecting ourselves or others or to neglect to do so, or the opportunity to spread disease deliberately (e.g. by indulging in biological warfare), if there are naturally occurring diseases. And men can only have the opportunity to prevent incurable diseases or to allow them to occur, if there are naturally occurring incurable diseases.[10]

An objector might reply that, though God may be justified in causing or allowing some evil, he is not justified in causing or allowing the great amount of evil by which we are actually confronted. But Swinburne allows for this response. He notes the view that the limit of suffering is too wide, that 'it ought never to have allowed Hiroshima, Belsen, the Lisbon Earthquake, or the Black Death'.[11] Then he says:

> But the trouble is that the fewer natural evils a God provides, the less opportunity he provides for man to exercise responsibility. For the less natural evil, the less knowledge he gives to man of how to avoid suffering and disaster, the less opportunity for his exercise of the higher virtues, and the less experience of the harsh possibilities of existence; and the less he allows to men the opportunity to bring about large-scale horrors, the less the freedom and responsibility which he gives to them. What in effect the objection is asking is that a God should make a toy-world where things matter, but not very much; where he can choose and our choices can make a small difference, but the real choices remain God's. For he simply would not allow us the choice of doing real harm, or through our negligence allowing real harm to others. He would be like the over-protective parent who will not let his child out of sight for a moment.[12]

V

Now more modern philosophers than I have mentioned have written about the problem of evil. But with this qualification made, I think it fair to report that three major lines of thinking have emerged with reference to the problem in recent years. These hold:

1 The problem of evil shows that there could not be a God.
2 God's goodness can be partly defended by means of the Free-Will Defence.
3 God's goodness can be partly defended by pointing to various good things which could not come to pass were it not for the existence of certain evils.

McCloskey and Mackie represent the first position. Alvin Plantinga represents the second, and so, in their way, do Hick and Swinburne. And Hick and Swinburne also represent the third position, which can be taken as an addition to the Free-Will Defence. But how cogent are these positions? To begin with I shall comment on positions two and three. Then I shall say something about position number one.

VI

Perhaps I can begin to indicate where I stand on the question of the Free-Will Defence by referring to some remarks of Professor Antony Flew. In his book *The Presumption of Atheism*,[13] Flew refers to the Free-Will Defence as presented by Plantinga. And Flew is exceedingly critical of it. Why? Because, for one thing, it ignores what Flew calls 'the essential theist doctrine of Divine creation'. 'That doctrine', Flew observes, 'apparently requires that, whether or not the creation had a beginning, all created beings — all creatures, that is — are always utterly dependent upon God as their sustaining cause. God is here the First Cause in a procession which is not temporarily sequential'.[14]

Now here, it seems to me, Flew has a point. And it is one worth developing. For why should one believe in God at all? There is a strong tendency to suppose that God must exist because the way things are requires an explanation. This may be so, and perhaps we can always ask of any state of affairs 'Why is it like this?' or 'Why does it have these particular features?' But we can, I think, always ask another question when we think about particular things and arrangements of things. We can, I think ask not 'Why are they like this?' but 'Why are they at all?' And this, I suggest, can be put by saying that it is reasonable to ask 'Why is there anything at all?' or 'Why is there something rather than nothing?' And it is with reference to this question that I should start talking about God. It is not, I should say, that God is one being on whom all others depend, which is what many people seem to suppose, including many philosophers of religion. It is rather that God is the reason why there are any beings at all. And this is precisely the view to which Flew is referring in the passage quoted earlier. Flew does not believe in God, but he knows well enough about the line of thinking I have just sketched. He knows, furthermore, that it is precisely what is being canvassed by the classical doctrine of creation as expounded, for instance, by Thomas Aquinas, for whom 'the Creator' means the 'cause of the existence of all things'. As Aquinas puts it at one point:

> It is not enough to consider how some particular being issues from some particular cause, for we should also attend to the issuing of the whole of being from the universal cause which is

536

God; it is this springing forth that we designate by the term 'creation' . . . To produce existence absolutely, not merely of this thing or that sort of thing, belongs to the meaning of creation. Manifestly creation is the proper activity of God himself.[15]

And here, I must say, I agree with Aquinas (whose rationale for belief in God has, I should add, been given a lively modern presentation in this journal by Herbert McCabe O P).[16] When we talk about creation we do not have to talk about one being supporting others. Instead we can talk about there being a reason why anything exists at all. And in talking about God as this reason we are talking about God as traditionally conceived – conceived, that is, as owing his existence to nothing, and as not being anything which can reasonably be supposed not to exist. To say that God is the reason why there are any beings at all is to rule out the possibility of God being himself caused to be anything. And to say that God is the cause of the existence of all things is to deny that God is himself a thing, from which it follows that he cannot be singled out as something of which one can say 'Why does this thing exist?'

Now these points evidently need to be developed at greater length, but let me now press on and apply them to the Free-Will Defence.

All versions of the defence presuppose that a free human action cannot be caused by God. But is this view tenable? Not if we take 'God' to mean what I have just suggested it can mean. I have been saying that by 'God' we can mean 'cause of the existence of all things'. I have been suggesting that, in Flew's terminology, 'whether or not the creation had a beginning, all created beings – all creatures, that is – are always utterly dependent upon God as their sustaining cause'. But if we say this, then God must be the cause even of free human actions. For these are part of created things. They are part of the world of which we can ask 'Why does it exist at all?' Flew sees this very well, and in this connection he approvingly quotes from Aquinas, who draws out the point as clearly as anyone. 'God', he says in the *Summa Contra Gentiles,*

not only gave being to things when they first began, but is also – as the conserving cause of being – the cause of their being as long as they last . . . So he also not only gave things their operative powers when they were first created, but is also always the cause of these in things. Hence, if this divine influence stopped every operation would stop. Every operation, therefore, of anything is traced back to him as its cause.[17]

I am saying that this is a credible position, from which I infer that the Free-Will Defence is open to criticism.

Turning now to the view that God's goodness can be partly defended by pointing to various good things which could not come to pass were it not for the existence of certain evils, it is important to be clear just what the defender of God is getting at if he offers this view. As I have said, Richard Swinburne and John Hick are two notable modern defenders of it; so what exactly are they trying to say? I think we can set out their position in three stages:

1 In creating, God brings about or allows various evils.
2 These evils are justified since they go with some good or goods which depend on them in some way.
3 Evil can therefore be seen as part of God's justified plan in creating or allowing for certain goods.

It should be clear that on this account God is thought of on analogy with a morally good person, or actually as a morally good person. Someone might say that evil shows that God is not morally good. But Swinburne and Hick are saying that this is not the case, for, on their view, evil is something for which God is not morally culpable. And they are saying this because they think that God is morally justified in bringing about or allowing evil, since in this way he brings about good (or various goods) which could not exist without it.

The strength of this position lies, as I see it, in its assumption that some good presupposes some evil. I can, for example, resist the · temptation of securing my present mode of being through refusing to help others who badly need my help. And my resistance to temptation in this case can intelligibly be regarded as a good thing. But it logically depends on someone being in a bad way. If I resist the temptation not to help others, there must be others in need of help. Or consider, for example, the virtues of courage and justice. There could be no courage if there were no danger, which may in some cases be good but which is not always so. And many forms of just behaviour depend on the existence of injustice. The man who rights a wrong, for instance, must have a wrong to right.

Yet having acknowledged all this, can we not still suggest that the Swinburne-Hick approach to God and evil is basically misguided? Its aim is to show that God is morally justified in bringing about or allowing evil. But why should we suppose that moral categories are applicable to God? Or, more precisely, does it make sense to say *either* that God *is* morally justified *or* that he is *not?* It would not make sense to say of an orange that it is either courageous or cowardly. It would not make sense to call a chair either honest or dishonest. Why, then, suppose that God can be either morally justified or not morally justified? Why suppose that any

question about God's moral status arises at all?

These may seem odd questions to raise, and they certainly grate on the ears of many people who believe in God. For many believers think that since God is good he is bound by moral requirements in much the same way as human beings are, that the goodness of God is moral goodness, where that is understood in the same way as it is when ascribed to men and women. But in the next article of this series I want to contest this view. Then I shall try to explore its implications and the reasons to which one might appeal in defending the view that there can be a good God in spite of the obvious presence of evil in the world.

[To be continued]

1   H. J. McCloskey, 'God and Evil', *Philosophical Quarterly*, 10, 1960, p 97. McCloskey's article is reprinted in Nelson Pike (ed.), *God and Evil* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1964).
2   John Mackie, 'Evil and Omnipotence', reprinted in Basil Mitchell (ed.) *The Philosophy of Religion* (Oxford, 1971), p 92. Mackie's article is also reprinted in the Pike collection noted above.
3   Mackie, op. cit. Mackie continues to defend this position in his posthumously published *The Miracle of Theism* (Oxford, 1982), Chapter 9.
4   Alvin Plantinga, *The Nature of Necessity* (Oxford, 1974), pp 165 f. Plantinga's approach to God and evil can also be found in his book *God, Freedom and Evil* (London, 1975).
5   *The Nature of Necessity*, p 190.
6   John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love* (2nd edn. London, 1977).
7   Richard Swinburne, *The Existence of God* (Oxford, 1979). For Swinburne on evil see also Stuart C. Brown (ed.) *Reason and Religion* (London, 1977), where Swinburne debates the problem of evil with Professor D. Z. Phillips.
8   Hick, op. cit. pp 226 ff.
9   *The Existence of God*, pp 210 f.
10 *The Existence of God*, pp 207 f.
11 *The Existence of God*, p 219.
12 Ibid.
13 London, 1976, Ch. 7.
14 *The Presumption of Atheism*, p 88.
15 *Summa Theologiae*, Ia, 45, 1 and 5.
16 'God: I – Creation', *New Blackfriars*, October 1980.
17 *Summa Contra Gentiles*, III, 67.