

He greatly valued his years working as a priest in the Church of England. They were part of the rich inheritance he brought to Catholicism and for which we should give thanks today. I am told that it was during a procession of the Blessed Sacrament that he decided to become a Catholic. It was his devotion to the Eucharist that brought him home to us. And surely it is in the Eucharist which we are now celebrating with Philip and for Philip, that we find the sacrament of that home for which we all search, which no suffering or death or sin or failure can break up and where we will never again find ourselves saying like Martha, 'If you had been here, Lord, my brother would not have died.' In this sacrament Jesus embraced everything that any human being could ever do to break up the home, and redeemed it. This was the meal which made Peter welcome, who would deny Christ, and Judas who would betray him. It was when Jesus embraced his own death, the ultimate shadow over every family. This is the sacrament of the home where Mary and Martha and Lazarus and Philip and all of us can find peace and healing and forgiveness and eternal life.

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## The Problem of Evil

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We are often told that there is something called 'the problem of evil'. What is this supposed to be? And how should we respond to it?

It is usually understood as a problem for *classical theism* (sometimes just called *theism*), supporters of which are commonly called *theists*. According to classical theism, God is all-knowing, all-powerful, and all-good. In the world around us, however, we discover a great deal of pain and suffering. We also find a great deal of moral evil—morally culpable actions (or refusals to act) which diminish both those who are morally bad and those around them. The problem of evil is commonly seen as the problem of how the existence of God can be reconciled with the pain, suffering, and moral evil which we know to be facts of life. And it has often been said that they cannot be. Thus it has been urged that the problem of evil constitutes grounds for disbelief in God.

The argument here has taken two forms. First, it has been said that evil is evidence against there being a God—that evil shows the existence of God to be *unlikely*. Second, it has been held that evil is proof that there *could not* be a God. The idea here is that theists are caught in a contradiction. They cannot say *both* that there is evil *and* that God exists. Since they can hardly deny that there is evil, it follows that God does not exist. As H. J McClosky declares:

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.<sup>1</sup>

## Notable Responses to the Problem of Evil

One approach to the problem of evil offered by people believing in God has been to deny the reality of evil and to say that, in spite of appearances, evil is an illusion, an 'error of mortal mind'. This is the view of Christian Science, according to which, in the words of its founder, 'Sin, disease, whatever seems real to material sense, is unreal ... All inharmony of mortal mind or body is illusion, possessing neither reality nor identity though seeming to be real and identical'.<sup>2</sup>

Another approach focuses on the notion of evil as punishment. The idea here is that evil can be seen as punishment which is justly inflicted by God. There are elements of this view in St. Augustine, connected with his theory of the Fall of Adam and Eve. In Albert Camus's novel *The Plague* it is dramatically expressed by the character of Fr. Panneloux, who preaches a sermon which begins with the startling words: "Calamity has come upon you my brethren, and, my brethren, you deserved it".

A much more common line of argument, however, is that the existence of some evil is a necessary means to some good. One version of this argument can be found in Richard Swinburne's book *The Existence of God*. According to Swinburne, natural evil provides, among other things, an opportunity for people to grow in knowledge and understanding. He writes:

If men are to have knowledge of the evil 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.<sup>3</sup>

Swinburne considers the possibility of God giving us the necessary knowledge by somehow informing us of the way things are and what we can do about it. He suggests that God might inform people verbally about such matters. But according to Swinburne this would mean that nobody could fail to doubt God's existence, and everyone would be forced to accept God and to act as he wished. Furthermore, none of us would be able to choose to acquire knowledge of the world for ourselves. 'I conclude', says Swinburne,

that a world in which God gave to men verbal knowledge of the consequences of their actions would not be a world in which men had a significant choice of destiny, of what to make of themselves, and of the world. God would be far too close for them to be able to work things out for themselves. If God is to give man knowledge while at the same time allowing him a genuine choice of destiny, it must be normal inductive knowledge.<sup>4</sup>

A related view can be found in the work of John Hick, one of the most prominent contemporary writers on the problem of evil. Echoing what he believes to be the position of the early church father St. Irenaeus (c.140–c.202), Hick argues that the existence of evil is necessary for the perfect development of human beings. Hick understands evil in the light of God's desire not to coerce people into accepting him. He suggests that people are sin-prone creatures, created as such by God, but able, in a world containing evil, to rise to great heights because they are given the opportunity to become mature in the face of evil. He writes:

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, 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 . . . 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 own autonomous structures and "laws" . . . A world without problems, difficulties, perils, and hardships would be morally static. For moral and spiritual growth comes through response to challenges; and in a paradise there would be no challenges.<sup>5</sup>

Notice how much emphasis is placed in this argument on human freedom. Such an emphasis is the main feature of another famous theistic response to the problem of evil—the free-will defence, which tries to show that God’s existence is compatible with moral evil. It can be stated as follows.

Much evil can be attributed to human agents. This evil need never have occurred, but if there is to be a world of free human agents, it must be possible for them to bring about moral evil. If they were thwarted in doing so, they would not be really free. Now it is better that there should be a world containing free agents than that there should be a world full of robots or automata. In creating people, therefore, God was faced with an alternative. He could either have created a world lacking moral evil, or he could have created a world where moral evil was a genuine possibility. If he had created the former he could not have created a world containing free agents. In fact, he created the latter, and this means that there is a genuine and unavoidable possibility of moral evil. In creating the world he did create God was making the better choice, because a world containing free agents is better than a world without them.

For the record, it is worth noting that some writers have tried to extend the free-will defence in order to deal with pain and suffering which often occur apart from what people do or do not do. According to these writers, we may account for such evil as the result of free choices made by *non-human* creatures. It has been argued, for instance, that we may account for it as the work of fallen angels who are able, through their free decisions, to wreak havoc on the material universe. One can find this view in the writings of St. Augustine.<sup>6</sup> It can also be found in C.S. Lewis’s *The Problem of Pain*, and in Alvin Plantinga’s *God, Freedom and Evil*. Lewis says that it seems to him

a reasonable supposition that some mighty created power had already been at work for ill in the universe . . . before ever man came on the scene . . . This hypothesis is not introduced as a general ‘explanation of evil’; it only gives a wider application to the principle that evil comes from the abuse of free-will.<sup>7</sup>

natural evil is due to the free actions of nonhuman persons; there is a balance of good over evils with respect to the actions of these nonhuman persons; and it was not within the power of God to create a world that contains a more favourable balance of good over evil with respect to the actions of the nonhuman persons it contains.<sup>8</sup>

## Illusion and Punishment

Do the above responses show that it is not unreasonable to believe in God in spite of the evil that apparently exists? In trying to discuss this question, we can start with the first of the views noted above: that evil is an illusion.

Many have been attracted to this suggestion. And they have, as a consequence, often been helped. But the suggestion is surely grossly counter-intuitive. Can any rational person seriously hold that, say, the hunger of a starving child is simply an illusion? And even if one could rationally defend this odd conclusion, there is another difficulty. As Peter Geach nicely puts it: 'If my "mortal mind" thinks I am miserable, then I am miserable, and it is not an illusion that I am miserable'.<sup>9</sup> As others have pointed out, even if evil is an illusion, it is a painful one, and it is therefore false that evil is nothing but illusion.

Our first response to the problem of evil is therefore unsuccessful. And the same can be said of the second. For it seems hard to believe all evil is something deserved. Take, for example, the case of Down's syndrome. Are we to say that newly-born babies with this condition have done anything for which it can be regarded as justly inflicted punishment? Questions like this have been pressed very hard, and with good reason. The eighteenth-century Lisbon earthquake killed about 4,000 people, and some tried to make sense of it by calling it 'divine retribution'. Voltaire (1694–1778) replied: 'Did God in this earthquake select the 4,000 least virtuous of the Portuguese?'. The question, of course, is to the point. Disease and other misfortunes do not seem to be obviously distributed in accordance with desert. Even the Bible admits as much.<sup>10</sup>

## Evil and Consequences

Yet what of the kind of argument represented by Swinburne and Hick? Some would object to it on moral grounds. Take, for example, D.Z. Phillips. He asks: 'What then are we to say of the child dying from cancer?'. His reply is: 'If this has been *done* to anyone, it is bad enough, but to be done for a purpose, to be planned from eternity—that is the deepest evil. If God is this kind of agent, He cannot justify His actions, and His evil nature is revealed'.<sup>11</sup> Phillips thinks that it is morally wicked to defend God's goodness by appealing to the fact that evil might be viewed as something he wills as a necessary means to certain goods. And, as Phillips himself observes, this is also the conclusion which Dostoevsky's character Ivan Karamazov reaches in his famous

And if the sufferings of children go to swell the sum of sufferings which was necessary to pay for truth, then I protest that the truth is not worth such a price . . . I don't want harmony. From love of humanity I don't want it . . . Besides, too high a price is asked for harmony; it's beyond our means to pay so much to enter on it. And so I hasten to give back my entrance ticket, and if I am an honest man I am bound to give it back as soon as possible. It's not God that I don't accept, Alyosha, only I most respectfully return Him the ticket.<sup>12</sup>

Is Phillips wrong in taking the line that he does?<sup>13</sup> It is very hard to see how we are to settle the question, for what is at stake now is a fundamental moral option, something that Wittgenstein calls an 'absolute judgment of value'.<sup>14</sup> Swinburne and Hick are prepared to allow that consequences can morally justify God in bringing about or permitting the evil that exists. Phillips is not. But there seems no way of showing that either side is right or wrong. It is not, for example, as if the parties in this debate disagree about some empirical matter which might finally be settled by further investigation. One side is saying that the whole attempt to justify God in terms of consequences is simply intolerable (Phillips calls it 'a sign of a corrupt mind').<sup>15</sup> The other side holds that it is not intolerable.

Yet we do, of course, normally accept that someone who permits or actively causes pain and suffering can sometimes be viewed as good. We would, for example, praise someone for cutting off someone's leg in order to save that person's life, even if the operation caused great pain to the patient. At this point, therefore, we may wonder whether the evil which we encounter in the world could possibly be regarded as a necessary means to some good. Can we, for instance, say that pain and suffering could be necessary means to some good?

A problem with Swinburne's and Hick's affirmative answer to this question is that we might well think it possible for God to have brought about a world of free human people without placing them in an environment such as that provided by this world, in which people can suffer as they do. One might therefore ask why God did not at the outset place people in a world free from the possibility of pain and suffering. Swinburne thinks it good that people should have the opportunity to wreak havoc, or to refrain from it and strive to bring about what is good. And it may well be true that if people are to have this opportunity, then something like our world is necessary. But is it really good that people should have such an opportunity? One might say that without it they

cannot be morally good. And it is true that there are virtues which could not be present in a paradise. There could not be courage, for example, for that presupposes danger. Maybe there could also be no prudence and temperateness, for these virtues seem to presuppose the possibility of harm to people. But there seems no reason why people in paradise should not be able to love and do good, even though their failure to do so would not result in anything like the pain and suffering which we come across in this world. Hick maintains that a paradise would be morally static, and one can see what he means. But it also makes sense to say that a paradise containing people would be a very good thing, and that God could bring it about without producing a world containing the pain and suffering found in ours. It makes sense, in fact, to say that a paradise containing people would be better than a world such as ours. What would be lacking would be the need for people to strive to prevent pain and suffering. There would be no struggle to deal with pain and suffering and to overcome it. But that would, surely, be a very good thing, better, indeed, than there being a world in which to be a person is to be involved in a need to struggle to deal with pain and suffering and to overcome it. A paradise would have no martyrs. But who wants martyrs? Even martyrs, presumably, do not want a world in which there are martyrs.

On the other hand, however, there is an obvious sense in which the occurrence of goodness is inevitably bound up with evil. For much that we can regard as evil is a necessary condition of good. Pain and suffering are not inexplicable. We may not know what, on a given occasion, accounts for an example of pain or suffering. But there will be something which does account for it, something, furthermore, that does so because it is doing well. As Herbert McCabe puts it, 'there can never be a defect inflicted on one thing except by another thing that is, in doing so, perfecting itself'.<sup>16</sup>

In other words, if we are to have a material world of the kind in which we live, in which some things thrive at the expense of others (in which, for example, lions can live because there are other animals on which they feed), there will inevitably be much that we can think of as evil. In this sense, it may be argued, goodness and evil are bound up with each other. And, so it may be added, the fact that God permits evil, or is somehow responsible for it, is no proof of his badness. One may think that if a material world like ours cannot exist without a great deal of pain and suffering, then God should never have created such a world. But can it be proved that, in creating a world like ours, God is positively bad? We would not normally call an agent bad just because the agent in question brings about a good which involves the occurrence of what can

also be viewed as bad. One may argue that some pain and suffering is clearly pointless, and that this is enough to show either that God does not exist, or that it is unlikely that he exists. Hence, for example, William Rowe suggests that the intense suffering of a fawn trapped in a forest fire would be an instance of apparently pointless suffering which could have been prevented by God and which would, if it occurred, be evidence against God's existence. He then goes on to suggest that instances like this seem to abound in nature, and that reason therefore suggests that the truth lies with atheism.<sup>17</sup> But the instance cited by Rowe is not obviously an instance of pointless suffering. It is a consequence of there being a world which operates according to physical laws rather than a series of miracles. And the same would be true of any instance similar to that cited by Rowe. In any case, how can we be sure that what seems to us pointless really is so? It might even be argued that we ought not to expect to be able to see the point of what might appear to us to be pointless suffering. For if it falls within the plan of an omnipotent, omniscient God, its point will be something understood only by what is omnipotent and omniscient.<sup>18</sup>

## Freedom

For reasons such as these, then, the theist may suggest that pain and suffering do not present an unanswerable case against God's existence. And, with reference to moral evil, those who believe in God might also get some mileage out of the free-will defence. It is a premise of the defence that a world of free agents is better than a world of automata. Most people would accept this premise, and it is certainly true that we normally think well of those who allow their fellow human beings a measure of autonomy and freedom. The oppressive parent and the tyrannical lover, the dictator and the bully, tend to be regarded as less than fully admirable. Might it not therefore be said that, if God is really good, he could actually be expected to allow his creatures freedom? And might it not be said that he could actually be expected to allow them to act as they choose, with all the possible implications for the production of evil that this might imply?

It has been suggested that God could have made a world containing only free agents who always acted well, and that the non-existence of God follows from the fact that actual free agents have failed to act well. One can find this suggestion in the work of J.L. Mackie. According to him:

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.<sup>19</sup>

But, though it seems true that there is no contradiction involved in the notion of people always freely acting well, can God ensure that real people act well without compromising their freedom? In order to ensure that people always act well, God would presumably have to cause them always to act well. But if God does that, will it not be true that people are not, in fact free?

On at least one view of freedom, the answer will be in the negative. I refer here to what is sometimes called 'Libertarianism'. According to this, people's actions are only free if no cause apart from themselves brings it about that they act as they do. But should we accept that a free action cannot be caused by God? One might, at any rate, note that those who believe in God have reason for saying 'No'. For, as Antony Flew puts it, the contrary position conflicts with 'the essential theist doctrine of Divine creation'. And the reason for saying so, as Flew goes on to observe, is that the doctrine of divine creation '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 temporally sequential'.<sup>20</sup>

There are theists who do not think of creation in these terms. In their view, something can exist and be as it is without being totally dependent on God's causal activity. And for those who think in this way, it will seem natural to suppose that free actions, and other things as well, can exist uncaused by God. In words of John Lucas:

Not everything that happens can be attributed directly to the detailed decision of God. Although He knows how many hairs I have on my head, He has not decided how many there shall be. He distances Himself from the detailed control of the course of events in order, among other things, to give us the freedom of manoeuvre we need both to be moral agents and to go beyond morality into the realm of personal relations.<sup>21</sup>

But the traditional or classical notion of God (what we can identify

as classical theism) seems to rule this position out. Traditionally speaking, all things apart from God are there because God makes them to be there, not just in the sense that he lays down the conditions in which they can arise, but also in the sense that he makes them to be for as long as they are there. And on this account, all that is real in creatures is caused by God, including their activity. As Aquinas puts it:

Just as God 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 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.<sup>22</sup>

If we are working with this view, we have to agree that God is causally operative in the existence of all things all the time that they exist. And this must mean that he is causally operative in all the actions of human beings, for these are as real as anything else we care to mention.

In that case, however, must it not follow that there is no such thing as human freedom? If 'X is caused by God' entails that X cannot be a free action, then it does. But theists do not have to accept this entailment, and they have reason for refusing to do so. For how do we proceed when deciding whether or not people have acted freely on a given occasion? We look to see if there is any identifiable thing in the world which has impinged on them to determine their behaviour. But God, by definition, is no such thing. If classical theists are right, he is the cause of there being such things, and the cause of them continuing to be. And if that is what God is, then it makes sense to say that his being the cause of human actions need not render such actions unfree.

If Fred kills Bill under the influence of drugs or hypnotism, we say that he has not killed Bill freely. But that is because there is something in the world alongside and outside Fred making him do what he does. This would not be so, however, in the case of God causing an action of Bill. If God is the cause of things in the world existing and continuing to exist, he cannot be part of the world, and he cannot act on them from outside as things in the world act on each other. He will, in fact, be the necessary condition of them being and being what they are. Or, as Herbert McCabe puts it: 'The creative causal power of God does not operate on me from outside, as an alternative to me; it is the creative causal power of God that makes me *me*'.<sup>23</sup> And, if that is true, then it makes sense to say that even though my actions are caused by God, they

can still be my free actions. As one might also say: 'We are not free in spite of God, but because of God'.<sup>24</sup> This account certainly insists that some human actions are free. But it does so without committing its proponent to the view that free human actions cannot be caused by God, for it is saying that there being such actions depend on God.

One may however wonder whether theists who make this move are not now caught in a dilemma not so far mentioned. For suppose it is true that God is the cause of human actions, and that this can be so even though some human actions are free. Would it not also be true that God is the cause of moral evil? And would he not be this though able to arrange that there is no moral evil? Most people who believe in God say that his creating and sustaining of creatures is itself grounded in freedom. God does not have to create. But if that is so, and if God is the cause of moral evil, should we not conclude that he is proved to be bad on two separate counts? For would he not be bad (a) by being the cause of moral evil, and (b) by being the cause of evil which he could have refrained from causing?

Confronted by these questions, a defender of the view that God is good though he causes human free actions might suggest that God is justified in producing moral evil because of some concomitant good. But there does not seem to be any concomitant good when it comes to moral evil. The evil of a lamb's being eaten by a lion might be balanced by the flourishing of the lion. But with moral evil there is no flourishing at all. Those who are guilty of moral evil sometimes do damage to others. And they always damage themselves. For, in being guilty of moral evil, they are failing as moral agents. Good may accidentally arise from someone's being guilty of moral evil, but evil acts in themselves have no good aspect.

There is a fairly traditional theistic response to these observations. According to this, human moral failure cannot be thought of as something for which God is responsible because it is, in a sense, nothing at all. The idea here is that, in being the maker and sustainer of the universe, God can only be responsible for what is real, and that human moral failure is somehow unreal.

But that idea is surely very counter-intuitive. What, we may ask, could be more real than human moral failure? The founder of Christian Science said that evil is an illusion. And we have seen why that suggestion is unacceptable. Should we not therefore say that moral evil is perfectly real and that God must cause it if he is the cause of human free actions?

It is, however, worth asking what kind of reality is involved in there being human moral failure. Could it, for instance, be that there are

human moral failures in the sense that there are cats? Are human moral failures substances of any sort? Are they things which we can intelligibly take to be created or sustained by God?

The answer would seem to be 'No'. Human moral failures occur when people perform or refrain from performing certain actions. But they are not substances. They are what we have when people (who are substances) fail to aim for a good for which they should aim. If that is so, however, it actually does make sense to say that they are, in a sense, nothing at all. They are what we have when there is a gap between what is there and what ought to be there. And, if that is so, one might well argue that they cannot be caused by God. For a gap of this sort is not the kind of thing which we can think of as being caused by anything or anyone. It is a matter of absence, of what ought to be there but is not. And, for this reason, the theist may deny that God can be the cause of moral evil. If moral evil is an absence of a certain good, it is not something which can be caused by anything, whether divine or human. People may be morally evil, and their evil may be attributed to them. If I am morally evil, then I am at fault. I have gone wrong. But this is not to say that, when people act badly, they cause (bring about) something which we can call moral evil (as someone can be said to be a cause or producer of a substantial thing). By the same token, so we may argue, even though God causes free human actions, it does not follow that he causes something which we can call moral evil. It follows that he has brought it about that there are actions of various kinds. But it does not follow that, if the actions are evil, he has brought about anything which can be considered as an intrinsically evil thing—a blot on the landscape, as it were. All that follows is that he has brought it about that there are people who fail to be as good as they could be. As McCabe, again, writes:

I could not, of course, act unjustly unless I existed and were sustained in being by God. I could not do it unless every positive action I took were sustained in being by God. My desire for riches is a positive thing, and a perfectly good positive thing, created by God—the only thing is that it is a *minor* thing. I should desire other things more than this. My failure to seek my true happiness and fulfilment, of course, since it is a failure, an absence, a non-being, is not created or sustained or brought about by God.<sup>25</sup>

Someone boiling with envy and malice cannot just be described as lacking something. And bad moral qualities can be ascribed to people just like good ones. Fred might be described as just. But he might also be described as unjust. In this sense, so we may say, moral failure is a

positive matter. But envy, malice, and comparable drives still involve failure in being as good as one could be. What worries us about them is the fact that they make people less than what they should be. What worries us about them is that those in their grip are settling for a lesser good.

Looked at from this perspective, the serious question facing someone who says that God causes human free actions is not 'Is God the cause of moral evil?'. It is 'Why has God not caused more moral goodness than he has?'. Moral evil may be seen as a matter of what ought to be there but is not. So we need not worry about what causes it. But we may well wonder why there is not more moral goodness than there is or has been. And we may consequently wonder whether God can be good since he has not produced more moral goodness than he has. We may wonder whether God is guilty by neglect.

Some would say that he is (and that he cannot, therefore, be good). But that response assumes that God is under some obligation to produce more goodness than he does. And it seems hard to show that God (whether or not we believe him to exist) would have to be conceived as under any such obligation. For how would one show this?

One might think in terms of analogies. If I am a teacher, and if my pupils end up knowing nothing more than they knew when they came my way, then I might be reproached for failing in my obligation to teach them something. Or, to take another example, a nurse is obliged to do certain things, and he or she may be chided if she does not do them. But it is surely absurd to think of God as having a job in which he contracts to produce a given result. Such a notion of God would, at any rate, be quite at odds with traditional ways of conceiving him. And if we think of God as maker and sustainer of the universe it is absurd to suggest that there is any quantity of goodness which he ought to produce. It might be said that God is obliged to produce the best possible world. But the best possible world is not something makeable. Talk of a 'best possible world' is as incoherent as talk of a 'greatest prime number'. As C.J.F. Williams observes:

It is a consequence of God's infinite power, wisdom and goodness that, for any world we can conceive him creating, it is possible to conceive him creating a better world. More than that—for this has nothing to do with what we can or cannot conceive—for any world which God can create, there is another, better world which he could also have created'.<sup>26</sup>

## The Goodness of God and the Problem of Evil

If what I have said so far is right, the problem of evil does not rule out the possible existence of God. To the charge that theism is incompatible with acknowledgement of evil's reality, one may reply that, for all we know, the evil in the world may be justified as necessary for certain goods. If it is said that evil makes it unlikely that God exists, one may respond by saying that we may well be in no position to determine what might be produced by an omnipotent, omniscient, good God, and we can give some reason for saying that the nature of the world as we find it gives no solid reason to suppose that God is not good. At this point, however, it is worth pointing out a further line of defence open to someone who thinks it possible or likely that there is a God in spite of the existence of evil. It hinges on the question 'What do you mean by "God is good"?'.

Those who believe that God's existence is impossible or unlikely because of the reality of evil usually mean 'Given the reality of evil, it is impossible or unlikely that there is a God who is morally good'. And many of those who defend belief in God work on the same assumption. But suppose we now introduce a new question into the discussion. Suppose we ask whether the theist is bound to regard God as morally good. Once we do this a whole new line of defence is open to someone who thinks it reasonable to believe in the existence of God along with the existence of evil. For, clearly, if belief in God is not necessarily belief in the existence of a morally good agent, then the problem of evil cannot even get off the ground insofar as it is taken to be a problem concerning God's moral goodness. As some philosophers would say, it turns into a pseudo-problem. And then, of course, it is not necessarily a reason for ignoring any positive case offered for believing in God. For if the problem of evil depends on thinking of God as a morally good agent, and if theists do not have to regard him as such, then the problem is not necessarily a problem for belief in God.

So do we have to say that belief in the existence of God is belief in the existence of a morally good agent? Do we have to suppose that the goodness of God is moral goodness? Here, it seems to me, there are grounds for replying in the negative.

One may, of course, say that if God is good then he must be morally good since, if he is not, we cannot mean anything in calling him good. It might also be argued that God must be morally good since moral goodness is the highest form of goodness known to us and cannot, therefore, be lacking in God. But theologians have taught that God is good without holding that his goodness is that of a morally good agent.

They have said, for example, that God is good because he somehow contains in himself the perfections of his creatures, all of which reflect him somehow. And it is implausible to hold that moral goodness is the only goodness there is. There are good chairs, good radios, good dinners, good essays, good books, good poems, good maps, good all sorts of things. And to say that moral goodness is the highest form of goodness we know is precisely to beg the question in the context of the present discussion. If we can know that God exists, and if God's goodness is not moral goodness, then moral goodness is not the highest form of goodness we know. There is the goodness of God to be reckoned with.

A common objection to this suggestion is to say that God must be thought of as morally good since God is a person, and since persons are good insofar as they are morally good. On this account, God is at least as good as I am when I am good. And, so the argument usually goes, he is actually a lot better. I am sometimes morally bad, but, so many have urged, God always gets it right. He is a perfectly morally good person.<sup>27</sup> Yet a Christian, at any rate, might wonder about the expression 'God is a person'. It does not occur anywhere in the Bible. The Christian God is the Trinity, of Father, Son, and Spirit. And, though Christians say that there are three persons in the Trinity, they do not mean that God is three persons in one person. So why should they hold that God is a person?

Perhaps they should say that God is personal, and that 'God is a person' says nothing more than that. Even if we accept that point, however, there is, surely something odd in the suggestion that to call God good must be to say that he is morally good. For if we are talking of the Maker and sustainer of creatures, must it not, rather, be true that God can be neither morally good nor morally bad?

I presume at this point that a morally good agent is someone exemplifying virtues of the sort listed by Aristotle (384–322 B.C.)—the cardinal virtues of prudence, justice, temperateness and courage. We might also (as, of course many do) say that an agent is morally good if he or she acts over time in accordance with certain duties or obligations. It has been said that a morally good agent is simply a subject who does no morally bad action. But since that can be true of a dog, something more seems required. To deem an agent to be morally good we need positive grounds for attributing to that agent virtue, or obedience to duty or obligation. And this, of course, means that if something is such that virtue or obedience to duty or obligation cannot intelligibly be attributed to it, we have no reason to think of it as either morally good or morally bad.

So consider now the sense in which the cardinal virtues can

intelligibly be ascribed to God. Can we think of him as exemplifying prudence, temperateness or courage? Not if these virtues are what Aristotle thought them to be—dispositions needed by human beings in order to flourish as human beings. Christians will not find it amiss to speak of God as just. But they cannot mean by this that God gives others what he owes them (commutative justice), for the notion of him being indebted to them makes no sense. As source of everything creaturely, God cannot receive gain by what is creaturely and then return it. If we are entitled to call him just it can only be because he can be said to act in accordance with his own decrees (this not implying anything about the content of those decrees) or because he gives to his creatures what is good (this not implying that he gives the same to every creature). This, in fact, is the view of God's justice found in the Old Testament. The justice (or righteousness) of God is not there a matter of distributive justice. It is a matter of him acting in accordance with his declared will for Israel.<sup>24</sup>

It might be said that some creatures are such that God ought to give them certain things, e.g. that he ought to reward virtuous people with happiness just because they are virtuous (assuming we draw some distinction between 'being virtuous' and 'being happy'). At this point, however, we come to the issue of God's duties or obligations, and the point to make here is that we have good reason for resisting the suggestion that God has any duties or obligations. Could he, for instance, have duties or obligations to himself? Should he, for example, strive to keep himself healthy? Should he try not to let his talents or abilities go to seed? One might say that God has obligations to others than himself that he is, for example obliged to reward good people with happiness. But this suggestion also makes no sense. What can oblige God in relation to his creatures? Could it be that there is a law which says that God has obligations to them? But what law? And where does it come from? Is it something set up by someone independently of God? But how can anyone set up a law independently of God? Is God not the Maker of everything apart from himself?

Someone might say that there are duties and obligations binding on God, and that this just has to be accepted. But why should we believe that? What, indeed, are we to suppose ourselves to believe in believing that? Perhaps we should be thinking that there are moral laws with which God is presented just as he is presented with logical laws. And perhaps we should say that, just as God has to accept that a given law of logic holds, so he must accept that there are certain courses of action which he must either refrain from or adopt. But the cases cited here are not parallel. We can speak of God as 'bound' by laws of logic. But this



does not mean that he is bound by any command to do what can be done. And it does not mean that he has a duty or obligation to do anything we care to mention. To say that someone has a duty or is obliged to do something is already to suppose that the person in question is bound by some law or other. But why should we suppose that God is bound by some law or other?

One might say that God is bound by moral laws binding on all of us. One might say, for example, that God is bound (or duty bound, or obliged) not to murder innocent people. But God, of course, cannot murder innocent people. He cannot be singled out and accused of doing anything which, if Fred were to do it, would get him condemned for murder in a court of law. God has no fingerprints. He cannot be proved to have held any gun against someone. And he cannot be seen by anyone to have done so. He can be said to have willed what happens when someone gets murdered (for the person would not have been murdered had God not willed it somehow). But can he be thought to be bound by a moral law forbidding him to will as he does? What would the law be? Perhaps it would run 'No human being and no god may conspire in the bringing about of the death of an innocent person'. But that law cannot be truly thought to have been obeyed by the God who makes and sustains the universe. For he has most manifestly conspired in the deaths of many innocent people. Had God de-created the universe in 1066, many innocent people who have died since then would not have died. So God conspired in their deaths.

An objector might say that he did so with morally cogent reasons recognized by him as such. It might be argued, for example, that he did so because he knew that this would have resulted in an objectively better state of affairs than some alternative state of affairs. But can it be held that there having occurred all that has happened since 1066 is better than there having been nothing since 1066? One might say that given 1066 and what followed, there have been more good things than there would have been if history had ended in 1066. But would that mean that a world with 1066 and what followed would be objectively better than a world ending at 1066? We can count good things, but can we evaluate between the world ending at 1066 and the world going on to 1991 so as to say that one of them is, in some absolute sense, better than the other? And what is a 'state of affairs'? How many of them can you number around you as you read this article?

Quite apart from such musings, however, the argument is flawed because it presupposes that God has a duty or obligation to do this, that, or the other. One has duties and obligations as part of a definite, describable context. A nurse, for example has certain duties in the light

of such things as hospitals, drugs, sickness, doctors, death, and patients. A parent has obligations against a background of families, children, and society. And so on for other examples. In that case, however, it makes sense to deny that God has duties and obligations. In the light of what context can he be said to have them? There would seem to be no context at all, and the notion of him having duties and obligations is therefore an idle one. If anything, it should be said that God must be the cause of duties and obligations, for, if God is the Creator, he must be the cause of there being situations in which people have such things (i.e. our good is something deriving from God since he makes us what we are).

Someone might reply that God does have obligations in that he has obligations to his creatures as a parent has obligations to his or her children. Before you produce a child, someone might argue, it is indeed true that you have no obligations to it (because it is not there). But, having produced the child, you do have obligations. And, so the argument might continue, this is how it must be with God. Having fathered me, he is bound to act towards me in certain ways. But this argument would simply miss the point. Let us suppose that God does have obligations towards his creatures. How is he to fulfil them? He can only do so by bringing it about that certain events come to pass. But he can only do that by willing the existence of things. And how can he be obliged to do that?

- 1 H.J. McClosky, 'God and Evil', *Philosophical Quarterly* 10 (1960), p.97.
- 2 Mary Baker Eddy, *Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures* (Boston, 1971), p.257.
- 3 *The Existence of God* (Oxford, 1979, revised edition, 1991), pp.210 f.
- 4 *The Existence of God*, pp.210 ff. For development of this position by Swinburne see also 'Knowledge from Experience, and the Problem of Evil' in William J. Abraham and Steven W. Holtzer (ed.), *The Rationality of Religious Belief* (Oxford, 1987).
- 5 *Evil and the God of Love* (2nd edn., London, 1977), pp.372 ff.
- 6 See *The City of God*, Book II.
- 7 *The Problem of Pain* (London, 1940), pp.122 f.
- 8 *God, Freedom and Evil* (London, 1975), p.58. In speaking of non-human agency as he does, Plantinga is not asking us to believe that there are non-human agents responsible for evil. He is asking us to note a possible explanation for certain kinds of evil. As Plantinga puts it, he is concerned to offer a 'defence' rather than a 'theodicy'. See *God, Freedom and Evil*, p.28.
- 9 *Logic Matters* (Oxford, 1972), p.305.
- 10 *Job* 9:22-23; *Luke* 13:2-3; *John* 9:3.
- 11 *The Concept of Prayer*, p.93.
- 12 *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. Constance Garnett (London, 1950), vol.1, part II, book V, chap. IV, p.250.
- 13 A similar line is pressed by Kenneth Surin in *Theology and the Problem of Evil* (Oxford, 1986), pp.80 ff.
- 14 'A Lecture on Ethics', *The Philosophical Review* 74 (1965).
- 15 See Stuart C. Brown (ed.), *Reason and Religion* (Ithaca and London, 1977), p.115.
- 16 Herbert McCabe O.P., *God Matters* (London, 1987), p.31. Cf. Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Ia,22,2.

- 17 William L. Rowe, 'The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism', *American Philosophical Quarterly* 16 (1979), reprinted in Marilyn McCord Adams and Robert Merrihew Adams (ed.), *The Problem of Evil* (Oxford, 1990).
- 18 Cf. Stephen J. Wykstra, 'The Humean Obstacle to Evidential Arguments from Suffering: On Avoiding the Evils of "Appearance"', *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 16 (1979), reprinted in Adams and Adams (ed.), *op.cit.*
- 19 J.L. Mackie, 'Evil and Omnipotence', *Mind* 64 (1955), reprinted in Adams and Adams (ed.), *op.cit.*, p.33.
- 20 *The Presumption of Atheism*, p.88.
- 21 *The Future* (Oxford, 1989), p.229.
- 22 *Summa Contra Gentiles* III,67.
- 23 Herbert McCabe O.P., *God Matters*, p.14.
- 24 McCabe, *op.cit.*, p.15. For the same view, see James F. Ross, 'Creation II', in Alfred J. Freddoso (ed.), *The Existence and Nature of God* (Notre Dame and London, 1983), and Germain Grisez, *Beyond the New Theism* (Notre Dame and London, 1975), Chapter 18.
- 25 *God Matters*, p 36
- 26 C.J.F. Williams, 'Knowing Good and Evil', *Philosophy* 66 (1991), p.238.
- 27 Cf. Richard Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism*, chap.11.
- 28 Cf. Walter Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, Vol.1 (London, 1961), p.240.

## Early Irish 'Feminism'

### Gilbert Márkus OP

There is a tendency among critics of 'patriarchal' culture or religion to point to the high status of women in early Irish or other Celtic societies as a model for change, suggesting that these societies displayed what one might call 'actually existing feminism'. The assumption appears in otherwise scholarly works. Thus Dillon and Chadwick:

It is indeed impossible to have any true understanding of either Celtic history or Celtic literature without realizing the high status of Celtic women.'

Elsewhere we are invited to 'think of the superior place of women in early Celtic society'<sup>2</sup>. But what is the evidence for these claims?

#### What the Myths do *not* reveal

The case made by Dillon and Chadwick for the high status of women in Irish society rests largely on the roles played by women in mythic literature: