

The Problem of Evil and Modern

Philosophy – II

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1

Is God morally good? Is he morally bad? Confronted by the reality of evil his defenders have sometimes said that he is morally good, or, at least, that there is insufficient proof of his moral badness. Why? Because, so they say, the following argument is acceptable:

- 1 In creating, God brings about or allows various evils.
- 2 These evils are justified since they go along 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.

But does it make sense to say *either* that God is morally good or that he is *not*? This is the question I raised at the end of my previous article on God and Evil.¹

Many people would find it odd, or even offensive, They would say that since God is good, he is bound by moral requirements in the way that 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. Richard Swinburne is a good representative of this view. God, he says, is perfectly good. What does this mean? It means, says Swinburne, that God knows which actions are morally good and which actions are morally bad, and that God always does actions which are morally good and never does actions which are morally bad. According to Swinburne, 'God's perfect goodness follows deductively from his omniscience and his perfect freedom'.² Since God is omniscient he will 'know the truth value of all moral judgments whether or not they are true or false'.³ Since he is perfectly free he 'will always do any action which he recognizes to be over all better to do than not to do, and so one which he judges to be morally obligatory'.⁴

God, like man, cannot just act. He must act for a purpose and see his action as in some way a good thing . . . Nothing would count as an act of God unless God in some way saw the doing of it as a good thing . . . An agent subject to no non-rational influences, that is, a perfectly free agent, can never do an action if he judges that over all it would be worse to do the action

than to refrain from doing it . . . Now if moral judgments have truth-values, an omniscient person will know them. His judgments about which actions are morally bad and which actions are morally obligatory, will be true judgments. Hence a perfectly free and omniscient being can never do actions which are morally bad, and will always do actions which are morally obligatory, and so he will be perfectly good . . . God will always do any action for doing which there is over-riding reason, never do any action for refraining from doing which there is over-riding reason; and only do an action if there is a reason for doing it. We may call this aspect of God's nature his complete rationality. It includes his perfect goodness, and gives us some expectations about the sort of world he will be expected to create . . . ⁵

John Hick also takes what is basically the same line. He does not insist, as Swinburne does, that God is morally obliged; but he does say that God is good because he is loving. And 'loving', for Hick, seems to mean much the same when applied to God as it does when applied to morally responsible men and women. Hick is asking how God can count as a loving person given the reality of evil. And his answer to the question is contained in his view that God is working towards a goal which is good in itself and which cannot be achieved without evil. We often praise people for aiming at a great good which cannot be achieved without evil of some kind. In the same way, says Hick, we can have some idea of how God's goodness survives any charges brought against him with reference to the evil in the world. God, for Hick, is loving because he does what by standards of morally responsible human love can readily be regarded as loving. In Hick's view, God is loving because he does what would justify us in calling a human person a morally responsible lover – had that person the power and knowledge of God. 'It is', says Hick, 'part of the meaning of Christian monotheism that there is an ultimately responsible moral being, who is absolute goodness and love, whom we may trust amid the uncertainties and anxieties of the gradual unfolding of reality to us in time'.⁶

But there are, I think, objections to talking about God as 'an ultimately responsible moral being' and the like. And perhaps I can now say what I think these are. In doing so I will need to refer back to my previous article. There I considered the Free-Will Defence, and I argued that one need not regard God as some kind of being existing alongside created things and able to interfere with them. I contested the view that God can 'step into' or 'push in on' or 'tinker with' created things. The word 'God', I suggested, can be used to refer to the reason why there is anything at all, to the cause

of the existence of all things. God, I argued (with acknowledgements to Herbert McCabe O P)⁷ can answer the question 'Why is there something rather than nothing?' And it is as the answer to this question that God has been thought of in classical doctrines of creation like that expounded by Thomas Aquinas.

Now suppose one accepts such doctrines of creation. What are their implications?

One of them emerged in my previous article. If God is the cause of the existence of all things, then God must be the cause of all free human actions. And thus it is that there are grounds for rejecting the Free-Will Defence.

But there is more to say than this, For if God is the cause of the existence of all things, then he cannot himself be a thing. I mean that he cannot be either a physical or non-physical being, that he cannot be a subject that can count as a distinct individual with its own nature. If X has a nature, then X is a subject with some distinguishing or individuating characteristics. X either belongs to a world and is something quite distinct within it; or X constitutes a world by itself. But if God answers the question 'Why is there anything at all?' then he cannot be like this. For if he were, then he would simply be unable to answer the question 'Why is there anything at all?' As a member of a world, as a distinct subject alongside others, or as the one and only individual of its kind, he would be something of which we can intelligibly ask 'Why does this thing exist'?

.Returning, now, to our present concern, reflect on what must be involved in being an 'ultimately responsible moral being' (to use Hick's phrase), or (to use Swinburne's terminology) a person who does no morally bad actions and always does what is morally obligatory.

To begin with, a being will have to be involved. I mean that an 'ultimately responsible moral being' will have to be something alongside others, something with its distinct nature marking it off as this thing and not that, as this kind of thing and not that kind of thing. And this is also what a morally good person will have to be. To recognize one's obligations and to be a person doing so is to belong to a world where obligations apply to one as a member in that world. One has obligations as part of a context, as a being in situation, as a being in relation to others.

But if God is the cause of the existence of all things, and if this means (as I think it must) that God is not a being with a nature, then how can he be an ultimately responsible moral being? Or how can he be someone who always does what is morally obligatory? It seems to me that God can be neither of these things. He cannot be a responsible being if he is not a being at all, if he is not something

that can be marked out as this particular subject with this nature and not that. And as the cause of the existence of all things God cannot have any context imposing obligations on him. Why not? Because to talk of God as the cause of the existence of all things is to place God outside all contexts. As the cause of the existence of all things, God can only be the cause of moral obligations and the like, for, as the cause of the existence of all things, God must be the reason why there is any situation in which people have moral obligations.

One might retort that this cannot be so. God, one might say, does have obligations. God, it might be said, has created. So God has obligations to his creatures, just as a parent has obligations to his children. But this reply misses the point. How could God fulfil his obligations to his creatures, supposing for a moment that he had them? If God is the cause of the existence of things, he could only fulfil his obligations by causing something to be – by creating, in fact. To fulfil his obligations God would have to bring it about that certain states of affairs existed. But it makes no sense to say that God has an obligation to create. As I am thinking of it, for God to create is for God to bring it about that there is something over and against there being nothing at all. And how can God have an obligation to do this? I can be obliged to bring it about that some hungry man has food. But if there is nothing at all, and if I am what accounts for the fact there there is anything, to what can I be obliged? To have an obligation to do something presupposes some state of affairs (or maybe many states of affairs) in the light of which I ought to do something. But if I am the cause of all states of affairs, then there is nothing presupposed to my action, and no situation imposing obligations on me. God may bring it about that his creatures have obligations. But he cannot, it seems to me, intelligibly be supposed to have obligations himself – not if he is the reason why there is anything at all. A parent has obligations flowing from the nature of children, the nature of society, and the nature of the world in general. Given that there is nothing presupposed to one's action, however, given that one is not part of a world at all, then no similar obligations accrue to one at all.

So it can, I think, be said that God cannot be morally responsible, that he cannot be morally obliged in any meaningful sense. One may think that in arguing otherwise one is doing honour to God. But, in the assertion of Aristotle, much admired by Professor Peter Geach, *phortikos ho epainos*, the praise is vulgar.⁸ Yet if this is so, then what becomes of the kind of talk about God and evil offered by writers like Swinburne and Hick?

As I have said, I agree that there may well be certain goods

that cannot be brought about without what one might reasonably call evil. But, if what I have just been arguing has any cogency, we cannot say that because some evils belong with some goods, God is morally justified in bringing about that which involves certain evils. For if God cannot be a morally responsible being, and if God cannot be thought of as doing what he is obliged to do (doing what is morally obligatory for him), then the notion of God being morally justified seems to break down. It is not, we might say, that God is *not* morally justified. It is rather that he cannot be either morally justified or morally unjustified – just as, to return to my earlier examples, an orange cannot be either courageous or cowardly, or a chair either honest or dishonest. Swinburne and Hick, and many others, deal with God and evil by arguing that God may be morally justified in allowing the evil that exists. But if, in general, God can be neither morally justified nor morally unjustified, then Swinburne and Hick (and those who agree with them) seem to be arguing to no purpose. And that, fundamentally, is what I think they are doing. They are, in effect, defending a conclusion which ought never to be defended in the first place.

II

But now for another problem. I am saying that God need not be thought of as morally justifiable. Yet God is said to be *good*. But if God is not morally justifiable, can he be called good? Is it possible to think of God's goodness in anything other than moral terms, as if God were not really like a morally good human being? Is not the believer in God forced, after all, into the position represented by writers like Swinburne and Hick?

In view of what I have already suggested, one need not, I think, suppose that God is good in exactly the same way that morally good people are good. There can, I suggest, be no question of God constantly making morally good choices, or of his building up a virtuous character for himself. In this sense, at any rate, one can say that God has no moral life.

But one can, I think, add that this does not entail that moral categories are entirely inapplicable to God, assuming, as I now am, that God is conceived of as the cause of all existing things. Since that may seem to contradict what I have just been saying, the point needs some explanation.

Consider, to begin with, the notion of bringing about what is recognizably good for people, of bringing about genuine human happiness, for instance. On the view of God which I have in mind, it is certainly true that God brings about what is good for people, whatever else he brings about. For as the cause of the existence of all things, God must be the cause of all things, among which we include whatever is good for people, including, for example, genu-

ine human happiness.

Now someone who brings about what is good for people would naturally be thought of as providing evidence of moral goodness. Moral categories would sensibly be applied to him. So why cannot it be said that moral categories are sensibly applied to God as the cause of all that we think of as good for people? I think this can, in fact, be said. I am not, of course, arguing that if 'God brings about X' is true, and if 'Y brings about X' is true, then God must be like Y in all respects. I am not denying the difference between God and people. And I am not saying that 'morally good', when applied to God, means the same as what it does when applied to, for example, someone who starts a charity. But language is a flexible instrument. Of a charitable man one can say: 'He brings about what is good for people'. And one can apply moral categories to such a man for this reason. And I therefore think that, since one can say of God that he is the cause of the existence of all things, and since we can understand the application of moral categories with reference to the notion of bringing about what is good for people, one can at least make some sense of the notion (one can at least see some point in saying) that God can be spoken of as morally good. One will evidently need to allow that God's bringing things about and a human being's bringing things about are vastly different. God, as Creator, brings things about by bringing it about that they exist over and against nothing. Human beings, by contrast, bring things about by acting on what already exists. But this does not mean that no sense can be given to talk about God's moral goodness; it does not mean that human moral categories are totally inapplicable to God, or that they are applied to God without any justification. Having a bright idea is very different from having a baby; but one can talk of 'having something' in both cases. In the same way, helping a person to a state of health is different from creating a healthy person. But in both cases one can talk of something good being brought about, something which, in one case, may be evidence of moral goodness, and, in the other, evidence of something analogous. All analogies break down somewhere, and so does the analogy between God and a morally good person. And that is why one can appreciate apparent paradoxes like Eckhart's 'So if I say: "God is good," that is not true. I am good, but God is not good. I can even say: "I am better than God," for whatever is good can become better, and whatever can become better can become best of all. But since God is not good, he cannot become better. And since he cannot become better, he cannot be best of all'.⁹ And thus it is, I think, that one cannot make too much of, for example, the notion of God having moral obligations and acting on them. But this does not mean that

the analogy between God and morally good people is totally unviable. And I am suggesting that it need not be.

As for the suggestion that if God is not a morally good person and the like, then God cannot be good: that just does not work at all. Not all goodness is moral goodness. A good meal is not morally good; and neither is a good boat. So why must a good God be good in just the same way as a morally good human being? Given that one thinks of God as the cause of the existence of all things, I should have thought that God must be very different from any human being, and that, for reasons I have already given, there are bound to be things which are true of morally good human beings but which cannot be true of God. The reply may be: 'But we can only judge God by human standards'. Yet here I agree with Professor Geach. He notes the objection that, being men, we 'can only judge God by human standards', and he adds:

The last phrase is merely equivocal. If what is meant is that we men can only judge God by standards that we men judge by, then we have an uninteresting tautology. If what is meant is that our standards for deciding whether God is lovable and admirable must be the same as our standards for deciding whether men are lovable and admirable, then I simply deny this: they need not be and they should not be the same.¹⁰

Geach has been much criticized for making of God a kind of monster whose will must be obeyed, and who must be praised, simply because of his power. I should urge, by contrast, that Geach is one of the few modern philosophers to take seriously the implications of belief in a Creator God.

III

Yet an objector may now raise another difficulty. I have now said that something can be made of the assertion that God is good when we bear in mind that he brings about what we can regard as good. But, as the cause of the existence of all things, God surely brings about what we regard as bad. So why not apply to him terms used when characterizing people as morally bad? Does not the argument of the last section backfire on someone who uses it to defend the view that God is good?

It would, I think, indeed backfire if reason could not be given for holding:

- 1 God cannot be bad.
- 2 God must be good in a sense not captured by saying that there is some reason for applying to God terms of moral commendation.

Fr Herbert McCabe has already defended the first of these theses in an earlier issue of *New Blackfriars*,¹¹ and since I agree with McCabe's defence I shall here simply refer the reader to it, adding

only that if McCabe is correct then the claim that evil disproves the existence of God is clearly answerable. But I should, in conclusion, like to say something in favour of the second of the above theses.

IV

Philosophers have offered various explanations of what is being said (or what can be reasonably meant) when people say that something is good, or when they talk about 'goodness' or 'the good'. But one view, at least, would be widely accepted nowadays – at least by moral philosophers and the like. This is the view that goodness is not definable in terms of any particular quality, that a good X is not an X with a particular property shared by all good things, as an orange X is an X with a particular property shared by all orange things.

Yet though goodness is not definable in terms of any particular quality, we can, I think, still make one general comment about it. In the *Nichomachean Ethics* Aristotle suggests that 'the good' is 'that at which all things aim'. And it seems to me that Aristotle is right here. To be a good X is what all X's aim at, for to be a good X is simply to be what an X is by nature, to be an unimpeded X. And what a thing is by nature, what it is when unimpeded, is what, as Aristotle would say, it aims to be. In other words, one can say of anything that it aims at being itself, that it aims at simply being whatever it is that it is – not in any conscious way, necessarily; but by nature, by virtue of what Mill calls its 'tendencies' and Aquinas calls its 'inclinations' or 'appetites'. A thing is what it is by virtue of its being by nature some sort of thing. And it will tend to be, or it will incline to be, whatever it needs to be *qua* whatever it is. And this is what Aristotle means by saying that the good is 'that at which all things aim'. He means that things are good insofar as they have succeeded in being what they naturally tend to be. And he also means that success in being what something tends to be, that in which the goodness of something consists, is that to which it is drawn. Here there is a firm connection made between goodness and desirability or attractiveness. Goodness in general is that which is desirable or attractive; it is that to which things are drawn – though what it amounts to in terms of qualities or properties will vary.

Now, as I say, I agree with Aristotle at this point. One can, I think, equate being good with being what is desired or attractive. The good is what all things desire. But what is the relevance of this to the goodness of God? My reply can be put in the form of a syllogism:

- 1 What all things desire or are attracted to is good.
- 2 All things desire or are attracted to God.
- 3 Therefore, God is good.

But this argument needs some elaboration.

I have already suggested why to be good is to be desirable or attractive. A thing naturally desires or is attracted to its good. The good for X is attracted to or desires *qua* X. But how can things be said to desire or be attracted to God? Does a rabbit desire God? Are all men and women attracted to God? If 'desire' means 'consciously desire', and if 'is attracted to' means 'is consciously attracted to', then the answer to these questions is no. But with this qualification made, I should answer them affirmatively. All rabbits desire God. And all men and women are attracted to God. Why? Because they are all aiming at (tending to) what God intends for them, and God's intentions for them are no different from God himself.

An analogy is useful at this stage. Let us suppose that a baker makes bread. And let us suppose that he makes good bread, and that he does so deliberately. Insofar as it is good bread that the baker produces, what he makes, his bread, achieves a degree of perfection; and its good lies in this. This is what it aims at *qua* bread. But what is it aiming at here? Not just being good bread, we may say. For the bread has a maker, and it is therefore aiming at what its maker intends for it. I mean by this that what the bread tends to in being good bread is just what the baker intends it to be. And in this sense the perfection, the goal, of the bread lies first in the baker, and only secondly in the bread. The baker is not a good loaf of bread. He is not to be described as, for example, 'crusty' and 'tasty'. But the loaf he makes is there by virtue of him, and in being good bread it aims to reproduce the goal conceived by the baker. In this sense we can say that the baker has in him the perfection that his bread seeks, the perfection by which it succeeds (if it succeeds) in being good bread.

Now the point I want to make is that the analogy I have just introduced is one way of indicating what it can mean to say that God is good. God is not a baker, and he can be said to make things by creating them, which is a completely unique activity proper to God alone. The baker makes by working on something; God does not work on anything in creating. Or, as Aquinas neatly puts it: 'God's proper effect in creating is that which is presupposed to any other, namely existence *tout court* (*esse absolute*). There is not anything that can work dispositively and instrumentally to produce this, since creation is not from any pre-existing material to be rendered or prepared by an instrumental cause's action'.^{1 2} Yet to talk about God is to talk about the 'Maker of all things visible and invisible'. Or, as I have suggested in these articles, it can be thought of as a way of speaking about a first cause, the reason why there is anything at all. And among the things that exist are

things which are good, things which aim at or tend to or desire their perfection. And from this it can be argued that in being good things, all things can be said to exist in accordance with the intention of God. For –

- (a) he is their Maker, in the unique sense of ‘making’ that creation involves, and
- (b) something that is made acts in accordance with the intention of its maker when what is made, is made intentionally (as in the bread example).

And this, I think, means that in aiming at their perfection in striving to be good, things can be said to be aiming at what is actually in God. God, I am suggesting, is no good thing. But, since he is the Maker of all good things, he has in himself all that things are aiming at or tending to insofar as they are aiming at or tending to what is good for them. Just as the bread, in tending to its perfection *qua* bread, is tending to what the baker has intentionally in him, just as it is, in this sense, seeking to reflect him, so all created things can be said to be tending to what God has in him as their cause. And this cannot be thought of as different from God himself. Why? Because, as I have argued, God need not, and ought not, to be thought of as a being with a nature – as you and I are beings with natures. To be God is to be whatever it is that accounts for the fact that there are any beings with natures. Having the perfection of bread in him is something that does not belong to the nature of the baker, and the baker’s intention in making good bread is not to be identified with the baker himself. But there cannot be any distinction in God between himself and his nature. And for this reason, fumbling in the dark though we are in doing so, we seem forced to say that God’s intending the natures of what he creates is not something distinguishable from him – as if he could be thought of now as some particular thing, and then as the same thing intending the natures of what he creates. This, of course, is the classical Thomistic doctrine of divine simplicity,¹³ but it is none the worse for that. God is, you might say, what God does.

One obvious reply to this is that, if it is true, then we cannot understand what God’s goodness amounts to. But that, I think, is true. To understand what God’s goodness amounts to would depend on understanding what God is. And I do not see that we can understand this, unless we retreat to thinking of God as an invisible human being, which itself raises problems both of understanding and rationality. Yet as I have argued in these two articles, we can say why we need to talk of God. And we can say why we can talk of God as good. We can talk of God as analogous to the morally good people who bring about what we take to be good.

And we can talk of God as the Maker who has in him the perfection to which his creatures tend. We can talk of God as having in himself that to which things are seeking to conform in seeking their perfection, which, in turn, is something they can only do because they are made to be by God. In this sense God is the beginning and end of all things.

And that is another Thomistic conclusion. As Aquinas puts it himself:

Goodness should be associated above all with God. For goodness is consequent upon desirability. Now things desire their perfection; and an effect's perfection and form consists in resembling its cause, since what a thing does reflects what it is. So the cause itself is desirable and can be called 'good', what is desired from it being a share in resembling it. Clearly then, since God is the primary operative cause of everything, goodness and desirability fittingly belong to him . . . In desiring its own perfection everything is desiring God himself, for the perfection of all things somehow resembles divine existence.¹⁴

This is not an easy doctrine; but I think it worth pursuing. So my argument is really that modern philosophy might profitably think about the problem of evil along less than modern lines.

- 1 'The Problem of Evil and Modern Philosophy – I', *New Blackfriars*, December 1982.
- 2 Richard Swinburne, *The Existence of God* (Oxford, 1979), p 97.
- 3 Swinburne, *op. cit.*, p 98.
- 4 Swinburne, *op. cit.*, p 101.
- 5 Swinburne, *op. cit.*, pp 98 ff.
- 6 John Hick, *God and the Universe of Faiths* (Glasgow, 1977), p 69. Hick's way of talking about God and evil has been criticized along lines not wholly dissimilar to those adopted by me by D. Z. Phillips in Stuart C. Brown (ed.), *Reason and Religion* (Ithaca and London, 1977). Hick's most recent statement of his views on God and evil is to be found in Stephen T. Davis (ed.), *Encountering Evil* (Edinburgh, 1981).
- 7 'God: I – Creation', *New Blackfriars*, October, 1980.
- 8 Cf. *God and the Soul* (London, 1969), p 105. Cf. *Providence and Evil* (Cambridge, 1977), Chapter 4. The reference is to Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, X, 8, 1178b, 16.
- 9 Edmund Colledge and Bernard McGinn (Trans. & Intro.), *Meister Eckhart: The Essential Sermons, Commentaries, Treatises and Defence* (New York, Ramsey, Toronto, 1981).
- 10 Peter Geach, *Providence and Evil*, pp 80 f.
- 11 'God: III – Evil', *New Blackfriars*, January, 1981.
- 12 *Summa Theologiae*, Ia, 45, 5.
- 13 The doctrine can be found in *Summa Theologiae*, Ia, 3. It is usefully expounded and discussed by Peter Geach in *Three Philosophers* (Oxford, 1973) and by David B. Burrell in *Aquinas, God and Action* (London and Henley, 1979).
- 14 *Summa Theologiae*, Ia, 6, 1.