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Axiology and the Problem of Evil

1. If some feature of the world is to be used to prove the non-existence of an omnipotent and omniscient being, then it must be demonstrable¹ that that being is committed to a value such that any being committed to that value would never knowingly allow the existence of that feature of the world if he had the power to prevent its existence. (The supposition that some feature of the world is to be used to prove the non-existence of this being is the supposition that *the proof to be constructed could not reach its conclusion unconditionally without using this feature of the world as a premise.* If, to take an example contrary to the above supposition, omnipotence and omniscience were incompatible with each other, the non-existence of the being could be proved without reference to any feature of the world. However, proponents of a negative argument from the existence of evil have not asserted such an incompatibility. They have thought, in accordance with my original supposition, that the existence of evil is a crucial premise of their argument.)

2. Thus, if moral wrongdoing and the suffering of sentient beings are to be used to prove the non-existence of God, it must be demonstrable that God is committed to a value such that any being committed to that value would never knowingly allow the existence of such so-called evil² if he had the power to prevent its existence.

3. It is traditionally said that believers in God claim that God is good, and that if he is really good – if calling him good is not an equivocation – then God, being omnipotent and omniscient, is necessarily committed in such a way that he would never allow the existence of such evil in the world.

4. However, this attempted simplification of the problem is clearly unfair, since many theologies contain the assertion that to call God good is to speak analogously, that calling God good is an equivocation, though not a pure equivocation. Of course, such an assertion can only be a prelude to explicating the analogy by which God is properly called good, and this explication itself is a prelude to the attempt to discern whether God's being good in this sense amounts to a value commitment which is incompatible with the assumptions of his omnipotence and omniscience and the existence of moral wrongdoing or the suffering of sentient beings. Nevertheless, the nature of God's goodness is an issue and cannot be foreclosed.

1. The terms 'prove' and 'demonstrate' are close enough to synonymy, at least in the above context, to allow the reader to understand each in as strict or as loose a sense as he chooses, provided that he understands the other similarly.

2. The term 'evil' is quite usually employed in this connection; the ambiguity and possible impropriety of that use will be discussed in section 12B below. Until then, I shall continue to use the term in the usual fashion, despite the problems involved.

5. While many theological attempts have been made to explicate God's goodness, I wish hereafter to concentrate on the attempt to explicate God's goodness as a commitment to righteousness. More explicitly, I wish to examine the theological view that the righteousness of men is that alone which God ultimately values, so that if the existence of evil is incompatible with the existence of God it is because no being so committed to such righteousness would, if it had the necessary knowledge and power, allow the existence of evil. Thus, any incompatibility between any other value and the existence of evil will, according to this theology, be relevant to the existence of God only if God's commitment to this other value is a necessary consequence of his commitment to righteousness.

6. At this point the problem of evil seems to rest on the answers to exactly two questions: 'What is righteousness?' and 'Would any being committed to righteousness disallow or at least curtail moral wrongdoing and the suffering of sentient beings if he had the requisite knowledge and power?' I turn to these questions now, but when they have been answered we shall find the problem of evil resting upon the more basic axiological question: 'Is a god committed to righteousness a good god?' (sections 11 and 12).

7. The explication of the biblical concept of righteousness is a theological undertaking requiring, *inter alia*, learned exegesis of texts. Rather than undertake that task, I propose to postulate an account of the nature of righteousness: 'Righteousness is primarily attributable to men. A man is righteous if he is in right relationship to God. More explicitly, a man is righteous if he chooses to conceive life as significant and to understand the significance of his life in terms of God's plans for the world, and if (and to the extent that) he also attempts to conduct his life in such a way as to be an instrument through whom God's plans can be accomplished. Thus, biblical history should be read as man's somewhat righteous response to God's manifestation of himself in a portion of history. The idea that an individual's life is significant is the idea that there is a goal, however vague and tentative the understanding of it may be, the accomplishment or the approaching of which is the ultimate basis of the individual's conduct, his ultimate *raison d'être*.³ The idea that God is righteous is correct, but must be understood in relation to our understanding of the righteousness of men for, when we call God righteous, we mean by that especially that a man's righteousness is his response to God's manifestation of himself, and generally that in various ways God is the source (though not the cause, as is made apparent in section 10, below) of men's righteousness. Hence, God, as the source of men's righteousness, is called righteous by various analogies of attribution. God is righteous inasmuch as his manifestation of himself gives life its significance and thereby provides the material for

3. There are, to be sure, difficult and important epistemological issues concerning the possibility of recognizing a manifestation of God in history. Thus this account of righteousness will certainly not solve all theism's philosophical problems singlehandedly. However, the issue now before us is the problem of evil.

a man's righteous response.⁴ According to this account, let us note immediately, righteousness is a possible property only in a world where there are agents capable of genuine choices, and this property will be cultivated only by those who are tempted to conceive life as significant.

8. While the explication of the biblical concept of righteousness is a theological task, philosophers will be rightly concerned about whether God's goodness can properly be understood *solely* as a commitment to righteousness. Has not God been traditionally called compassionate, merciful, and gracious? Does not God's goodness include these qualities and others? If so, is it not arbitrary to limit God's goodness to this one commitment? And how could such an arbitrary limitation help to solve the problem of evil?

Certainly it would be spurious to explicate God's goodness in such a way as to deny his mercy, his justice, or any moral properties traditionally attributed to him, but such a denial need not be and, indeed, is not involved in the theology under discussion. God is conceived as compassionate in his concern for the meaninglessness of human life which lacks a divine referent, merciful and gracious in revealing his purposes to a wayward people, whose waywardness negates any right to such revelation, and just in his judgments of the righteousness of the lives people have led. These conceptions do not present a theology of righteousness as negating traditional aspects of God's goodness. Rather, each of these aspects is defined by its relation to God's primary commitment to righteousness. It is in that relation that God is said to be compassionate. That is, his compassion for men is an appreciation of the meaninglessness of their lives without a divine referent, not a compassion for a man who has hit his thumb with a hammer.

9. With this understanding of a theology of righteousness, we may proceed to consider whether an omnipotent, omniscient being committed to righteousness would disallow (or even curtail) moral wrongdoing and suffering. It is very difficult to see why such a being should disallow such evil, for it is difficult to conceive any relationship between the existence of evil and the human attempt to be righteous. Certainly, it is possible to seek the significance of life in the plans which God reveals in history, even if there is very much wrongdoing and suffering. Indeed, it is not clear that moral rightdoing and the absence of suffering are even more conducive to righteousness than are moral wrongdoing and suffering. Thus, it is not at all obvious that the existence of evil is at all relevant to the existence of God, if we suppose that God is called good because he is committed to making righteousness possible through his revelations to men.

Nor can the problem of evil be reintroduced by insisting that a merciful God would not tolerate suffering or that a just God would distribute suffering fairly — not if God's mercy consists in his grace, his free giving of an unmerited

4. I have developed this account from my understanding of such studies in biblical theology as G. Ernest Wright, *God Who Acts* (London: S.C.M. Press, 1952), and G. Ernest Wright and Reginald H. Fuller, *The Book of the Acts of God* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1957).

revelation which gives life meaning, and not if God's justice consists in the manner of his final judgment upon each man's response to his revelation. If one understands God's goodness (including his mercy and his justice) through his commitment to righteousness, then the evils of moral wrongdoing and of the suffering of sentient beings are not problematic.

10. Much more closely connected to righteousness would seem to be men's willingness to seek for significance in life and to attempt to understand such significance in the light of God's plans. Yet, whereas God might conceivably do something to limit the quantity of men's sufferings, God, though omnipotent, is powerless to make men willing to seek significance in life, to make men seek it in terms of God's plans, and to make them act accordingly. Each of these actions would violate the freedom which, according to the theology we are considering, is the prerequisite of righteousness. Therefore each of these actions is logically incompatible with the existence of righteous men and thus impossible for a god committed to righteousness.

Perhaps explication will give this point proper stress. If a man is made to seek significance in life, if he is made to seek it in terms of God's plans for the world, and if he is forced to conduct his life in such a way as to be an instrument through whom God's plans can be accomplished, then he is not righteous, for the righteous man does these things freely. The righteous man is not made or forced to do them, either by men or by God. It is thus impossible for God to make men righteous. If man's righteousness is not to be manipulated and thus unreal, God can do no more than to manifest his plans for the world and thereby provide men with the opportunity to respond righteously.

11. At this point arises the sceptical question: Has not the problem of evil been dissolved by transforming the assertion of God's goodness into a pure equivocation? Is a god whose sole commitment is to righteousness really *good* in any sense? How can any being merit commendation as good if he is totally oblivious of wrongdoing and of suffering, especially the suffering of the innocent? Here we reach the point at which one must recognize that the problem of evil is ultimately a problem of opposed value systems, competing for one's allegiance. A man little moved by talk of the significance of life, but passionately disturbed by the sufferings of a little child, will have little use for righteousness or for a god whose primary claim to goodness is that he makes righteousness possible by manifesting his plans. But a man who finds all life hollow and a useless passion, until he discovers its significance, will find his sympathy for the suffering child tempered by his attempt to understand all of life's importance in terms of God's plans. If one accounts life's significance as real, then it will hardly seem odd, but, on the contrary, will seem pre-eminently fitting, to call good the source of all significance. Perhaps John Stuart Mill would have said, 'I'd rather go to hell than love that kind of God,' but St. Paul would stress that 'All things work together for good, for those who love God.'

12. Here some comparisons may be helpful:

A. To some extent my comments differ little from what many have said

about God's allowing moral wrongdoing: 'God must allow moral wrongdoing in order for men to have free choices of the (morally!) right.' I too have emphasized that God's power is logically limited by his creation of free men. However, there is an important dissimilarity here, for the freedom upon which I have insisted is the theologically central freedom to respond righteously, not the freedom to act morally. This point leads to the second comparison.

B. Madden and Hare, in their new book, *Evil and the Concept of God*,⁵ develop an atheistic view by arguing against a large variety of evasions, dis-solutions, and attempted solutions of the problem of evil. Yet the very type of theodicy which they fail to take seriously is the type that attempts to explicate the goodness of God through distinctly religious values. Their closest approach is found in their commentary on John Hick's book, *Evil and the God of Love*.⁶ There they begin well by noting Hick's assertion that God's interest is in soul-making, in the free turning of the individual soul toward God. They charge, however, that Hick does not prove that all of the evil – moral wrongdoing and suffering – in the world is necessary to achieve God's purpose of soul-making. But, if we take soul-making to be God's sole interest, then moral wrongdoing and suffering can militate against God's goodness only if God's value commitment (to soul-making) involves disallowing or at least curtailing moral wrongdoing and suffering or if God's commitment to soul-making does not suffice for his being good. Yet insofar as a commitment to soul-making approximates to a commitment to righteousness, I have argued against each of these alternatives.

Here we may do well to reconsider the term 'evil.' The problem of evil is traditionally the problem created by the existence of moral wrongdoing and the suffering of sentient beings. As I see it, moral wrongdoing and the suffering of sentient beings can pose a problem for a would-be theist only to the extent that he is not consumed by a desire for righteousness. Those fully and exclusively desirous of righteousness will find only one thing evil. That thing, which the Bible calls sin, is alienation from God, alienation from the source of life's significance.⁷ Thus, there is a problem of evil only if evil, in accordance with a disposition toward a non-theological value system, is conceived, not as alienation from God, but as moral wrongdoing or as suffering.

C. I also find it illuminating to compare the above account with St. Thomas' explanation of the existence of physical evil. The existence of such evil, Thomas argues, follows from the fact that God created a world, for if he is to create a world, it must be finite; if it is finite, it must be imperfect; and if it is imperfect, physical evil must exist in it. Regardless of whether the logic of this argument is impeccable, the argument does nothing, as Madden and Hare strongly emphasize, to explain the terrible quantity of physical evil. If there

5. Edward Madden and Peter Hare, *Evil and the Concept of God* (Springfield, Ill.: Charles C. Thomas, 1968).

6. London: Macmillan, 1966.

7. Moral wrongdoing is evil, according to this theology, because, and exactly to the extent that, it manifests sin, i.e. alienation from God.

must be earthquakes, for example, why can they not be confined to uninhabited regions? To this challenge, the above considerations present an answer, however awesome and terrifying, to the effect that God's love is of righteousness alone, that God's pleasure, in the face of physical evil, is solely in the righteousness of an agent's response. As I lie dying under the debris of an earthquake, I (and my wife) can only say that all men come and go, some before their times, but blessed be the Lord whose purposes remain throughout history. Here again we face competing value systems and gain a glimmering of the dread which Kierkegaard found in the decision to be a true Christian.