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# The Problem of Evil

Theism is the view that there is a God, omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good, a view shared by Christians, Jews and Muslims. The most powerful objection to theism has always been the objection that a perfectly good being would seek to prevent human suffering and wrongdoing, and an omnipotent being would be able to do so; and so, since humans suffer a lot, there can be no God. To rebut this objection the theist needs to explain why God, although omnipotent and perfectly good, would allow humans to suffer. To provide such an explanation is to provide what is called a 'theodicy'. In this paper I shall offer my theodicy, a theodicy — as I shall illustrate — based on the teachings of Christ and their development in the Orthodox tradition.

I understand God being omnipotent as his being able to do anything, that is anything logically possible — for example, he could annihilate the universe in an instant; but not able to "do anything logically impossible" (that is, anything the description of which involves a self–contradiction)—for example, he could not make me exist and not exist at the same time. The reason why God cannot "do anything logically impossible" is not because God is weak, but because such expressions as 'make me exist and not exist at the same time' do not describe anything which makes sense; no state of affairs would constitute 'me existing and not existing at the same time'. God being omniscient, I shall understand likewise, as his knowing everything that it is logically possible to know. If it is not logically possible for anyone to know our future free choices, then God's omniscience will not include such knowledge. But of course it will only be by God's choice that we have any free choices, and so that there is such a limit to his knowledge. I shall understand being perfectly free in the sense that his choices are in no way limited by, that is influenced by, irrational forces, as are the choices of humans. God only desires to do an action in so far as he sees a reason for doing it, that is in so far as he believes that it is a good action to do so. Being omniscient, he knows which

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actions are good and which are better than others. So if there is one best action for him to do in some situation he will do it. But if there are two or more incompatible equal best actions (that is two or more actions equally good and better than any other possible action) in that situation, he will have to choose between them for no reason at all (just as we have to do when in a similar situation).

God however must often be in a situation where we cannot be, of having a choice between an infinite number of possible actions, each of which is less good than some other action he could do. For example, angels and planets, and herbivorous mammals are good things. So, the more of them the better (given that, in the case of mammals, they are spread out among an infinite number of planets, so that they do not crowd each other out). So however many of these creatures God creates, it would have been better if he had created more. (And he could still have created more, even if he created an infinite number of them.) It follows from this that we must understand God being perfectly good in the sense that he will do many good actions, no bad actions, and the best or equal best action where there is one. Contrary to Leibniz, we cannot understand God being perfectly good in the sense that he makes the best of all possible worlds—for there is no best of all possible worlds; any world God makes, he could have made a better world. The problem of evil is not the problem that this world is not the best of all possible worlds. It is the problem that it looks as if God allows to occur or brings about many intrinsically bad states of affairs—suffering and wrongdoing.

I shall now argue however that it is not a bad (or evil) act to allow or bring about bad (or evil) states of affairs so long as certain conditions are satisfied, and I shall suggest that they are satisfied in the case of the evils of this world. Hence the evils of the world, the suffering and wrongdoing which (in virtue of his omnipotence) he could certainly prevent if he so chose, do not provide evidence against the existence of God.

A human is none the less good for allowing some evil to occur (e.g. allowing someone to suffer) so long as allowing that evil is the only way in which he can promote some good, so long as he does promote that good, so long as he has the right to allow the evil to occur (i.e. it is morally permissible for him to do so), and so long as the good is good enough to risk the occurrence of the evil. For example a human parent may take a child to the dentist and allow him to suffer a tooth

being filled, for the sake of his subsequent dental health so long as that is the only way in which he can promote this good state, and as a parent, he does have the right to do this for the child. The latter clause is important. No complete stranger has the right to take a child to the dentist to have his tooth filled without the permission of the child's parents, even if she thereby promotes a good state. Now we humans cannot always give a child dental health without the child having to suffer, but God could. It is only the logically impossible that he is unable to do. So extrapolating from the case of suffering to the case of evils generally, and from that case to the case of God who can do anything logically possible, I suggest that God can allow an evil E to occur, compatibly with his perfect goodness, so long as four conditions are satisfied.

First, it must be logically impossible for God to bring about some good G in any other morally permissible way than by allowing E (or an evil equally bad) to occur. For example, it is logically impossible for God to give us libertarian free will to choose between good and bad (i.e. free will to choose between these despite all the causal influences to which we are subject); and yet also cause us to choose the good. It is logically impossible for God to bring about the good of us having such a free choice without allowing the evil of a bad choice to occur (if that is what we choose). Secondly, God does bring about G. Thus if he allows the evil of us making bad choices, he must have given us the free will to choose between good and bad. Thirdly, God has to have the right to allow E to occur (that is, it must be morally permissible for him to allow E to occur). And finally, some sort of comparative condition must be satisfied. It cannot be as strong as the condition that G be a good better than E is an evil. For obviously we are often justified, in order to ensure the occurrence of a substantial good in risking the occurrence of a greater evil. A plausible formal way of capturing this condition is to say that the expected value of allowing E to occur—given that God does bring about G—must be positive. (Or, more loosely, the probable amount of evil which would result from allowing E to occur must be less than the goodness of G.) I shall summarise the claim, with respect to some evil E, that if there is a God, he could, compatibly with his perfect goodness, allow it to occur in order to promote a good G, as the claim that E serves a greater good.

It follows that if the only good states were sensory pleasures, God would not be justified in allowing any of the world's evils to occur; for not even the first condition would be satisfied with respect to those evils. God could eliminate all

the sensory pains, and all the grief and mental distress and whatever else is wrong with the world, and give sentient creatures (including ourselves) endless blissful sensory states of the sort caused—I am told—by heroin. Hence the existence of the world's evils would count conclusively against the existence of God. So what a theist must maintain is that there are many good states additional to sensory pleasures which God cannot (logically) bring about without allowing evils to occur.

Now it is not plausible to suppose that we know what are all the possible good states which evils could serve; and so it might seem that there is no irrationality in a theist claiming that all the world's evils serve greater goods, although he cannot for the most part say what they are. For if there is a God, these evils must serve a greater good. (Otherwise God would not have allowed them to occur.) And if you have very strong reason to suppose that there is a God, you have very strong reason to suppose that they do serve a greater good. The trouble is that it seems to many people at first sight fairly obvious that many of the world's evils could not be such as to serve any greater good. To many people it seems that incurable pain, cruelty to children, the eighteenth century slave trade, etc. could serve no greater goods—not because they claim to know what all the possible goods are, but because they claim to know enough about them to know that at least one of the conditions could not be satisfied with respect to some of the evils—e.g. that a God would not have the right to allow them to occur for the sake of *any* greater good, or that the only goods which some of these evils could serve are ones which do not in fact occur (although, given the evils, God could have brought them about). Almost all people, including in my view most religious believers, who do not have an overwhelmingly strong belief that there is a God, are inclined to think at first sight that many of the world's evils do not serve greater goods—and so that the existence of evil seems to constitute a strong argument against the existence of God. It is to such people that theodicy is addressed.

My view is however that, despite what seems at first to be the case, the four conditions are satisfied with respect to all known kinds of evil. Clearly however I cannot show that in detail in a short paper. But I can give reason to believe that these conditions are satisfied for some main kinds of evil from which humans suffer, and that — I hope — will begin to make it plausible that the argument from evil against the existence of God does not work.

I begin by pointing out ways in which the first condition is satisfied for various kinds of evil, and I begin with moral evil (that is, the evil which either deliberately or through negligence humans cause to each other). I have already alluded to the traditional free will defence which points out that a (libertarian) free choice between good and evil (logically) can only be brought about by allowing the agent to bring about evil. But a free choice which made no difference to the world would not be nearly as valuable a choice as one which made a difference. It would be a great good for humans to have libertarian free choices which allow us to exercise genuine responsibility for other humans, and that involves the opportunity either to benefit or to harm them. God has the power to benefit or harm humans. If other agents are to be given a share in his creative work, it would be good that they have that power also (although perhaps to a lesser degree). A world in which agents can benefit each other but cannot do each other harm is one where they have only very limited responsibility for each other. If my responsibility for you is limited to whether or not to give you the latest model of video phone, but I cannot cause you pain, stunt your growth, or limit your education, then I do not have a great deal of responsibility for you. A God who gave agents only such limited responsibilities for their fellows would not have given much. God would have reserved for himself the all–important choice of the kind of world it was to be, while simply allowing humans the minor choice of filling in the details. He would be like a father asking his elder son to look after the younger son, and adding that he would be watching the elder son's every move and would intervene the moment the elder son did a thing wrong. The elder son might justly retort that, while he would be happy to share his father's work, he could really do so only if he were left to make his own judgments as to what to do within a significant range of the options available to the father. A good God, like a good father, will delegate responsibility. But in order to allow creatures a share in creation, God has to allow them the choice of hurting and maiming, of frustrating the divine plan. So by allowing such hurting and maiming God makes possible the great good of humans freely choosing to benefit (rather than harm) each other and thus co–operate in God's plan. Jesus taught that it is a good for us to help others, saying 'It is more blessed to give than to receive' (As quoted by St Paul — see Acts 20:35). Or again: 'You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them; and their great ones exercise authority over them. But it is not so among you; but

whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you, shall be the slave of all. For the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many (Mark 10: 42–5). This passage classically connects greatness with service, and it is most plausibly read as saying that greatness consists in service

But human good choices are not merely good in themselves and in virtue of their immediate consequences. All human choices are character forming—each good choice makes it easier to make the next choice a good one—agents can form their own characters. Aristotle famously remarked: 'we become just by doing just acts, prudent by doing prudent acts, brave by doing brave acts' (*Nichomachaean Ethics* 1103b). That is, by doing a just act when it is difficult—when it goes against our natural inclinations (that is our desires)—we make it easier to do a just act next time. We can gradually change our desires, so that, for example, doing just acts becomes natural. Thereby we can free ourselves from the power of the less good desires to which we are subject. But again the great good of us having the free choice of character formation (choosing the sort of people we are to be) can (logically) only be had if there is the danger that we will allow ourselves to corrupt our characters (to become bad people).

Humans, The Book of Genesis claims, are made 'in the image of God' (*Genesis* 1:26) and the Fathers understood as a central feature of that image that we have free will; if we use it in the right way we will be conformed to God's 'likeness'. In the fourth centruy, for example, St Gregory of Nyssa wrote that 'pre–eminent' among all the facets of this image 'is the fact that we are free from necessity, and not in bondage to any natural power, but have decision in our own power as we please' (*On the Making of Man,* 16.11). In the eighth century St John of Damascus wrote that 'every man is said to be made in the image of God as regards the dignity of his intellect and soul — as regards, that is to say, the quality in man that cannot be scrutinized or observed, is immortal and endowed with free will, and in virtue of which he rules, begets and constructs'.[1] And at the end of the Eastern patristic period, in the fourteenth century, St. Gregory Palamas wrote that 'it is not by virtue of natural qualities, but by virtue of what one

[1] St John of Damascus, 'On the Virtues and Vices', in G.E.H. Palmer, P. Sherrard, and K. Ware (ed. and trans.), *Philokalia*, ii (Faber & Faber, 1981), 341.

achieves through free choice that one is close to or distant from God'.[2] And St Gregory stressed, as others did also, that part of the greatness of the human soul is that it has 'a capacity for sovereignty' («Topics…», 374.): the human soul 'overlooks the universe and has all things in its care' («Topics…», 356.) That is, in my terminology, the glory of humans is not just their free will, but the responsibility for the large consequences resulting from the exercise of that free will.

Now consider natural evil, that is evil of a kind unpreventable by humans, such as the evil of suffering caused by disease of a kind currently unpreventable. What is known as the "higher–order goods" defence points out that certain kinds of especially valuable free choice are possible only as responses to evils. I can (logically) only show courage in bearing my suffering if I am suffering (an evil state). My suffering from disease when I have the strong temptation to self–pity gives me the opportunity to show courage. It is good that we should have the opportunity (occasionally) to do such actions which involve resisting great temptations, because thereby we manifest our total commitment to the good. (A commitment which we do not make when the temptation to do otherwise is not strong is not a total commitment.)

It is good too that among the good actions which we should have the (occasional) opportunity to do is to help others who are suffering and deprived by showing sympathy to them and helping them to cope. Help is most significant when it is most needed, and it is most needed when its recipient is suffering and deprived. But I can (logically) only help others who are suffering if there is the evil of their suffering. In these cases, if there is a God, he makes possible the good of free choices of particular kinds, between good and evil, which—logically—he could not give us without allowing the evils (or evils equally bad) to occur. Or rather, it is the only morally permissible way in which he could give us this freedom. He could, it is true, give us the choice between trying to help others or refusing to do so (a choice which plausibly would give just as much opportunity for manifesting our commitments to good or evil) without the possibility of any actual suffering. For God could make a basically deceptive world in which other people appeared to be in great pain when really they were not. But in such a

[2] St Gregory Palamas, 'Topics of Natural and Theological Science', in G.E.H. Palmer, P. Sherrard, and K. Ware (ed. and trans.), *Philokalia*, iv (Faber and Faber, 1995), 382.

situation, first we would not have the real responsibility for others which is a great good. And secondly it would not be morally permissible—in my view—for God to make a world where people are moved to help others at great cost when the others do not really need help at all. God, if he is not to deceive us and yet give us a real free choice between helping and not helping others, must make a world where others really do suffer. And merely allowing the suffering caused by moral evil would not give very much opportunity for the choices which involve resisting great temptations; for this we need disease, accident, and the weakness of old age.

That suffering is a blessing for the sufferer in the opportunities which it provides him or her for heroic action and character formation is a constant theme in the spirituality of much Orthodox Christianity. Thus St Peter of Damascus wrote:

> Through what are regarded as hardships we attain a state of patience, humility and hope of blessings in the age to be; and by these so–called hardships I mean such things as illness, discomfort, tribulation, weakness, unsought distress, darkness, ignorance, poverty, general misfortune, the fear of loss, dishonour, affliction, indigence, and so on.[3]

These 'gifts', as St Peter calls them, allow us (but do not compel us) to respond in the right way to them, by actions of a kind which we would not otherwise have the opportunity to do. The point of poverty is that 'one can endure it with patience and gratitude'; the point of sickness is 'so that one may earn the crown of patience'. And these gifts provide opportunities for others who have the opposite gifts, to respond in the right way. Wealth, writes St Peter, enables us to 'perform acts of charity'; and he comments later that 'without the poor' the rich cannot save their souls or flee the temptations of wealth. Health enables us 'to assist those in need and undertake work worthy of God'. And so on.

It is good too that among the choices available to humans should be the choice, not merely of helping others to cope with natural evils such as disease, but of whether to reduce the number of such natural evils in future, e.g. prevent

[3] Extract from St Peter's writings in *Philokalia* op.cit. iii, p. 174. See also St John of Damascus, *On The Orthodox Faith*, 2:29, on the diverse good states which bad states make possible.

diseases. But to have this choice we need to know what causes these evils. The normal way in which we (the scientists among us, supported by money from the rest of us) try to discover such things is the inductive way. That is, we seek to discover the natural processes (bacteria, viruses etc.) which bring about diseases, and then construct and further test theories of the mechanisms involved. But scientists can only do that if there are regular processes producing the diseases, and they can only learn what these are by studying many populations and studying under which circumstances some disease is transmitted and under which it is not. So for the great good of this choice of investigating (or, alternatively, not bothering to investigate), there is required the necessary evil of the actual disease. If humans are to have the great opportunity of devoting their lives to scientific research for human benefit or not bothering to do so, there have to be sufferers from disease to make this possible. Many of the early Christian Fathers saw rationality (of which the ability to pursue such scientific inquiry is a paradigmatic example) together with free will as the two things which humans had which constituted their being made 'in the image' of God. Thus St John of Damascus wrote that God 'creates with his own hands man of a visible nature and an invisible, after his own image and likeness: on the one hand man's body he formed of earth, on the other his reasoning and thinking soul … The phrase "after his image" clearly refers to the side of his nature which consists of mind and free will, whereas "after his likeness" means likeness in virtue so far as that is possible" (*On the Orthodox Faith* 2:12).

All the same, you may ask, would it not be better if God planted in us strong true beliefs about the causes of all diseases and other natural evils, and then just left us with the choice of curing them or not? Is having the opportunity to exercise rationality in the inductive way worth the price? However if God abolished the need for rational inquiry and gave us strong true beliefs about the causes of things, that would greatly reduce the difficulty of making moral decisions, and so make it much less easy for us to show total commitment to the good and form heroic characters. As things are in the actual world, most moral decisions are decisions taken in uncertainty about the consequences of our actions. I do not know for certain that if I smoke, I will get cancer; or that if I do not give money to some charity, people will starve. So we have to make our moral decisions on the basis of how probable it is that our actions will have various outcomes—how probable it is that I will get cancer if I continue to smoke (when

I would not otherwise get cancer), or that someone will starve if I do not give (when they would not starve otherwise). These decisions under uncertainty are not merely the normal moral decisions; they are also the hard ones. Since probabilities are so hard to assess, it is all too easy to persuade yourself that it is worth taking the chance that no harm will result from the less demanding decision (that is, the decision which you have a strong desire to make). And even if you face up to a correct assessment of the probabilities, true dedication to the good is shown by doing the act which, although it is probably the best action, may have no good consequences at all.

So both in order to give us the opportunity to deal with all–important matters by exercising our rationality and in order to give us the opportunity of showing our commitment to the good most strongly by making our choices in a situation of uncertainty, it is good that God should not cause us to be born with strong true beliefs about the consequences of our actions, and so that we should have the opportunity to choose whether or not to seek more certain knowledge of the consequences of our actions. That will involve getting more data about the consequences of events, e.g. data from the past about what has happened to people who have smoked in ignorance of the possibility that smoking causes cancer. Seeking more certain knowledge, in other words, involves once again relying on normal induction; and that requires the existence of natural evils.

What next about criterion (2)? I have shown that various kinds of evil are necessary for the exercise of a (libertarian) free will which makes important differences to ourselves, each other, and the world. But do we really have free will at all in this sense of freedom to choose what to do, given all the causes which influence us, such that our choices make a difference to our brain states and so to which public actions we perform? As we make our choices, it seems to us that it is up to us how we choose, and it is a basic principle of rationality that it is probable that things are as they seem to be in the absence of contrary reason. I do not think that there is any adequate reason for denying that things are as they seem to us in this respect. It used to be claimed that science has shown that nature is deterministic and so our choices must be caused. Even if science had shown that this holds in the physical (that is, public) world, a full description of what there is in the world will have to include mental events (that is sensations, thoughts, intentions, etc.). Mental events are so different from physical events (including the brain events with which many mental events are correlated), that

it would be totally unjustified to argue from the deterministic character of the physical to any deterministic character of the mental. But then it is claimed that science has shown that the physical realm is closed, that is physical events cause and are caused by only physical events, and so that even if our will is free it makes no difference to the world. Science however has shown no such thing. For quite clearly our (physical) brain events cause mental events—if you stick a needle into me, I feel pain. And almost equally clearly mental events make a difference to physical events—what causes me to tell you that I feel pain (a physical event) is my pain (a mental event). That's evident to each of us in our own case; and if we didn't think that, we would have no reason to believe what anyone tells us about their mental life, because they would be caused to utter the words they do, not by having a pain but only by some brain state which we would have no reason to suppose to be correlated with a pain. The physical realm is not closed. Further, according to what I take to be the majority view among physicists, Quantum theory has shown that on the small–scale the physical world is not at all deterministic. While small–scale indeterminism may normally even out on the larger scale (if each atom has a 50% chance of decaying within a certain period, approximately half of a medium–sized block of such atoms will decay within that period), it is easy enough to construct systems in which small–scale indeterministic changes produce large–scale effects. The brain looks like a system of just that kind in which tiny changes get massively magnified. In that case any action of the mental world on the brain wouldn't even disrupt the operation of normal physical laws, that is the laws of Quantum theory. So I conclude that, while this issue is certainly not settled, it is reasonable to assume in the absence of contrary evidence that we do have libertarian free will and that our exercise of it makes a difference to what we do in the public world. If however I am mistaken and we do not have efficacious libertarian free will, some of my subsequent arguments will not be cogent.[4] Given that we do have libertarian free will, it is certainly responsible free will—our actions make the great differences to ourselves and each other which I have illustrated, and thereby we have serious responsibility for ourselves and each other.

[4] For fuller argument in favour of the view that we do have libertarian free will, see my *Mind, Brain and Free Will*, Oxford Univeristy Press, 2013, especially chs 4, 5, 7 and 8.

So given that there are goods and evils for which conditions (1) and (2) are satisfied, what about condition (3)? Does God have the right to cause or allow evil to occur to humans for the sake of some greater good? The trouble may seem more acute in that in many cases, including some mentioned above, good for one individual is promoted by evil endured by a different individual. Does God have the right to make you suffer for my benefit?

To allow someone to suffer for his own good or the good of someone else one has to stand in some kind of parental relationship towards him. I do not have the right to let some stranger, Joe Bloggs, suffer for his own good or that of Bill Snoggs, but I do have some right of this kind in respect of my own children. I may let my son suffer somewhat for his own good, or for the good of his elder brother—as when I entrust the younger to the temporary care of the elder with the risk that the elder may hurt the younger. Or I may send my daughter to a neighbourhood school which she may not enjoy very much but which will benefit others of the neighbourhood. I have such a right in respect of a child of mine, because in small part I am responsible for his or her life and so many of the good things which it involves. It is because the parent (who is not merely a biological parent but also a nurturing parent) is the source of much good for the child that he is entitled to take some of it (or its equivalent) back if necessary (e.g. in the form of the life having bad aspects). If the child could understand, he would understand that the parent gives life, nourishment, and education, subject to possible retraction of some of the gift. If this is correct, then *a fortiori,* a God who is, *ex hypothesi,* so much more the source of our being than are our parents, has so many more rights in this respect. For we depend on him totally from moment to moment, and the ability of parents and others to benefit us depends on him. But it must remain the case that God's rights are limited by the condition that he must not over time take back more than he gives. He must be on balance a benefactor.

But there do so often look to be lives in which the bad outweighs the good, about which we say that it would be better for such a person not to have lived. I urge however that this is a wrong assessment of many lives because it does not take into account a good which I have so far not mentioned —the good of being of use to others. It is an enormous good for anyone to be of use—whether by what they do by free choice, or by what they do involuntarily or by what happens to them, including what they suffer. Helping someone freely is clearly a great

good for the helper. We often help prisoners, not by giving them more comfortable quarters, but by letting them help the handicapped; and pity rather than envy the "poor little rich girl" who has everything and does nothing for anyone else. And one phenomenon prevalent in contemporary Western Europe in recent years draws this good especially to our attention—the evil of unemployment. Because of our systems of Social Security the unemployed on the whole have enough money to live without too much discomfort; certainly they are a lot better off than are many employed in Africa or Asia or nineteenth century Britain. What is evil about contemporary Western European unemployment is not so much any resulting poverty but the uselessness of the unemployed. They often report feeling unvalued by society, of no use, "on the scrap heap". They rightly think it would be a good for them to contribute; but they can't.

It is not only intentional actions freely chosen, but also ones performed involuntarily, which have good consequences for others which constitute a good for those who do them. If the unemployed were compelled to work for some useful purpose, they would surely be right to regard that as a good for them in comparison with being useless. And it is not only intentional actions but experiences undergone involuntarily (or involuntary curtailment of good experiences, as by death) which have good consequences which constitute a good for him who has them (even if a lesser good than that of a free intentional action causing those consequences). Consider the conscript killed in a just and ultimately successful war in defence of his country against a tyrannous aggressor. Almost all peoples, apart from those of the Western world in our generation, have recognised that dying for one's country is a great good for the one who dies, even if he was conscripted. Consider too someone hurt or killed in an accident, where the accident leads to some reform which prevents the occurrence of similar accidents in the future (e.g. someone killed in a rail crash which leads to the installation of a new system of railway signalling which prevents similar accidents in the future). The victim and his relatives often comment in such a situation that at any rate he did not suffer or die in vain. Although they still normally regard the suffering or death as on balance an evil, they would have regarded it as a greater misfortune for the victim (quite apart from the consequences for others) if his suffering or death served no useful purpose. It is a good for us if our experiences are not wasted but are used for the good of others,

if they are the means of a benefit, which would not have come to others without them.

Someone may object that the good for the victim is not (e.g.) dying in a railway crash when that leads to improved safety measures, but dying in a railway crash when you know that improved safety measures will result; and, more generally, that the good is the experience (the 'feel good') of being of use, not merely being of use. But that cannot be right. For what one is glad about when one learns that one's suffering (or whatever) has had a good effect, is not that one learns it, but that it has in fact had a good effect. If one did not think that—whether one knows about it or not—it would be good that the suffering should have some effect, one would not be glad about it when one learnt that it did. To take an analogy—it is only because I think it a good thing that you pass your exams even if I don't know about it, that I am glad when I come to know about it. And so generally. It is of course a further good that one has a true belief that one's suffering has had a good effect; but that can only be because it's a good in itself that it has had that effect. And if one thing which is good when one learns about it is that not merely have others benefited in some way, but that by one's own suffering one has been of use in causing that effect, then that is good even if one does not learn about it.

It follows from being–of–use being a great good that whenever God allows some evil to occur to B (e.g. causes B to suffer) in order to provide some good for A (e.g. the free choice of how to react to this suffering) that B is benefited as well—his life is not wasted, he is of use (either by enduring some evil or by his availability to do so). He is of use to A, but also of use to God; he plays a role in God's plan for A. And to be of use to the good source of being in the redemption of his creation is an enormous good. The starving, the persecuted, and the abused are of use to the wealthy on whose doorstep they appear, because—but for them—the wealthy would have no opportunity to be of use. They are the vehicle whereby alone the wealthy can be saved from self–indulgence and learn generosity. And thereby they are of use to God himself.

When one takes into account that those whose evil state is the means of great good to others (and of course also often to themselves) thereby also receive this enormous benefit, it becomes plausible to suppose that God has the right to cause the evil. For, however you weigh the one against the other, the evil carries with it the great good of being–of–use, which contributes towards making the lives of

the victims on balance good lives, and so ones in which God has the right to include some evil. But, I must add, if any life on Earth is still on balance bad, God has a *duty* to compensate for the bad in the after–life so that the total life of such an individual will be on balance good. That, in his omnipotence, he can do.

That it is a good for us, not merely if we freely choose to serve others or to serve God, but if we are of use to others or to God by what we suffer is also a theme of the New Testament. In several places it teaches that those who suffer in consequence of their choice to confess the name of Christ are fortunate to be allowed to have such a significant role in the proclamation of the Gospel. The apostles beaten for preaching the Gospel rejoiced 'that they were counted worthy to suffer for the name.' (*Acts* 5:41). And St. Paul wrote to the Colossians that he 'rejoiced' (*Colossians* 1:24) in his sufferings for their sake.

I come finally to the fourth–comparative–condition. Someone may agree with me that one does need a substantial amount of various kinds of evil in order to provide the opportunities for various goods. But he may feel that there is just too much evil in the world for the good it makes possible. There is just not enough good made possible by Hiroshima, the slave trade, the Lisbon Earthquake, or the Black Death, claims the objector. With the objection that if there is a God, he has overdone it, I feel *considerable initial* sympathy. And when I now proceed to justify God allowing these things, I hope that you will not think me callous. These are horrible things, and when they happen to people we must weep. But in cooler moments (and I hope that this is one of them) we must analyse the logical issues in as rigorous a dispassionate way as we can, and take very seriously the goods which the evils make possible. What makes these massive evils massive is mainly the number of people involved. But if each suffering of a thousand people is such that my four conditions are satisfied for it, then the suffering of the whole thousand will also be such that those conditions are satisfied. So given that one person being maimed in the Lisbon earthquake provided that person with the opportunity to show courage, and his relatives with the opportunity to show compassion and help, then a thousand people being maimed provided a thousand such opportunities. Each small addition to the number of sufferers makes a small addition to the number of those who can make serious good choices; and each small diminution of sufferers makes a small diminution in the number of those who can make serious good choices. Maybe there is a new kind of evil (other than suffering) involved if a whole community

suffers other than the suffering of all its members. If that is sometimes the case—for example, a whole community with all its traditions ceasing to exist might be an evil additional to the suffering of its members, it is also often the case that large–scale evils provide additional opportunities for good responses (other than those available to individuals affected by suffering) in the form of world–wide campaigns to help the victims (as happened for example with the recent Asian Tsunami), and also campaigns to prevent such horrors happening again. (The horrors caused by Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans led to campaigns to make great improvements to flood defences.)

Sometimes the problem with great evils is not the number of sufferers but the degree of the suffering. If there is a God, is not the suffering which he imposes or allows others to impose sometimes too intense for the good which it makes possible? But evils wouldn't matter so much if only the lesser evils occurred, and so it wouldn't matter so much if we ignored them. By allowing the more serious evils to occur God forces on people who have allowed themselves to live easy lives (and so become insensitive to more ordinary moral demands) the hard choices which alone (given their moral torpor) will allow them to begin to become holy people rather than sink into a subhuman selfishness. So many ordinary selfish people who see evils of serious torture or very painful disease are moved to make those life–changing choices (which no ordinary evils would move them to make), choices by which they eventually become saints. What the objector is asking for is, yes, there should be diseases, but not ones which maim or kill; accidents which incapacitate people for a year or two but not for life; we should be able to cause each other pain or not help each other to acquire knowledge, but not to damage our own or each other's characters. And our influence should be limited to those with whom we come into contact; there should be no possibility of influencing for good or ill distant generations. And most of our beliefs about how to cause effects, good or evil, should be beliefs with which we would be born. Such a world would be a toy–world; a world where things matter, but not very much; where we can choose and our choices can make a small difference, but the real choices remain God's. The objector is asking that God should not be willing to be generous and trust us with his world, and not give us occasional opportunities to show ourselves at our heroic best.

But surely, says the objector, there is a limit to the suffering which God would be justified in causing for the sake of the good which it makes possible. Yes, of

course, there is such a limit. And there is also a limit to the actual amount of suffering which any human suffers (except by his own choice). There is a limit of time—these days, it is roughly eighty years; and there is clearly also a limit of intensity. What the objector must be claiming is that the actual limit is too wide—if there is a God, he asks too much of us. When however one begins to take into account the great benefits, which I discussed earlier, *to the sufferer* of being privileged by his suffering to give others the opportunity to help him and of himself having a free choice of how to cope with his suffering and form a holy character, there begins, I believe, to be considerable plausibility in the claim that the expected benefit of God allowing that quantity and degree of suffering to occur which actually occurs outweighs the evil of the suffering.

Let me help you to see this by a small thought experiment which may be familiar to any of you who have read any of my other writings. Suppose that you exist in another world before your birth in this one, and are given a choice as to the sort of life you are to have in this one. You are told that you are to have only a short life, maybe of a few minutes, although it will be an adult life in the sense that you will have the richness of sensation and belief characteristic of adults. You have a choice as to the sort of life you will have. You can have *either* a few minutes of very considerable pleasure, of the kind produced by some drug such as heroin, which you will experience by yourself and which will have no effects at all in the world (for example, no one else will know about it); *or* you can have a few minutes of considerable pain, such as the pain of childbirth, which will have (unknown to you at the time of the pain) considerable good effects over several years on others yet to be born. You are told that, if you do not make the second choice, those others will never exist—and so you are under no moral obligation to make the second choice. (Moral obligations are obligations to someone, and you can only have moral obligations to those who exist at some time, past, present, or future.) But you seek to make the choice, which will make *your* own life the best life for *you* to have led. How will you choose? The choice is, I hope, obvious. You should choose the second alternative.

Of course God would be mad to allow endless suffering to give endless such opportunities for painful service; but God does not give any of us (except through our own choice) endless suffering. He allows suffering at most for the short period of our earthly life in order that in that life we may help others and form

ourselves in deeply significant ways—and we would be poorer without those opportunities.

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