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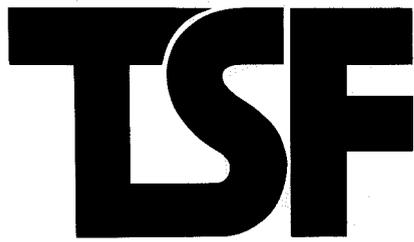
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INQUIRY

(Questions, proposals, discussions, and research reports on theological and biblical issues)

A PROPOSED SOLUTION TO THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

By Keith E. Yandell, Professor of Philosophy, University of Wisconsin, Madison.

1. Introduction: The Problem of Evil¹

"The Problem of Evil" can refer to various questions: what is the origin of evil? what is its nature? will there some day be no evil? how can evil be dealt with? can it be eliminated, or its quantity reduced? and so on. In philosophical contexts, it refers to yet another question: is the existence of evil compatible with the existence of God? This is our topic here. If the answer to this question is negative, it does not much matter what theology says about the other questions just noted.

"Is the existence of evil evidence against the existence of God?" breaks down into two other questions. One concerns the logical consistency of *God exists* and *There is evil*. The other concerns the *evidence* which *There is evil* may provide against *God exists*.

2. The Question of Consistency²

Larry Bird is a magnificent basketball player, but not even he can score a point in a game in which he does not play. Scoring a point in a game in which one does not play is not difficult, but impossible. It is not impossible in the sense in which "dunking" the ball into a basket ten feet from the floor is impossible for an overweight professor. It is impossible in the sense that its description involves a contradiction; *Bird scored but did not play* is a contradiction, and so it is logically impossible that even he accomplish this. A standard, and potentially devastating, criticism of Christianity is that *God allows evil*, or that *God exists and there is evil*, is a contradiction. In heaven and hell, on earth and throughout the galaxies, contradictions are false, and of a contradictory pair of statements, one must be true and one must be false.

If the critic is right, then, that *God exists and there is evil* is a contradiction, either *God exists* or *there is evil* is false. Christianity without God is a contradiction in terms. For that matter, so is Christianity without evil, for if there is no evil the doctrine of salvation from sin by grace is pointless—if there is no evil, there are no sins and so divine forgiveness has no object. Christianity without God is like a basketball team without players; Christianity without sin (and so evil) is like a basketball team without a basketball or a court.

3. The Consistency Strategy³

The critic claims that *God exists and there is evil* is a contradiction. A relatively simple argument to show that two allegedly incompatible statements *A* and *B* are not incompatible goes like this: if one can find a third statement *C* which, together with *A*, is clearly not incompatible with *B*, then *A* and *B* are not incompatible. *C* may be one statement, or a set of statements. The idea is: if *A*, *B*, and *C* is logically consistent, then so is *A* and *B*. To *God exists* and *There is evil*, add *God allows an evil only if he has a morally sufficient reason for doing so* and *God allows some evil*. It seems clear that *God exists, he allows an evil only if he has a morally sufficient*

reason for doing so, and he allows some evil and *There is evil* are not incompatible. Indeed, *God exists and . . . allows some evil* entails *There is some evil*. So it seems clear that *God exists* and *There is evil* are not incompatible.

4. Ethics and Evil⁴

For all its simplicity, the consistency strategy seems successful; apparently, one can use it to show that *God exists* and *There is evil* are not logically incompatible. The critic of Christianity, however, may not be so easily persuaded. There is one crucial condition on any use of the strategy; if one argues that *A* and *B* is logically consistent because *A*, *B* and *C* is, *C* itself must not be a contradiction. So the critic may claim that the notion of God having a morally sufficient reason for allowing an evil itself is inconsistent. She will rest this claim on one or another understanding of omnibenevolence or divine goodness; that is, the critic will so understand *God is all-good* that it is logically inconsistent with his being all-good that he have a morally sufficient reason for allowing any evil. Then it will be logically impossible that God allow any evil, and this use of the consistency strategy fails. Arguing along these lines is tantamount to claiming that whatever ethical theory is correct, it must be one for which the existence of evil is *not* necessary to the existence of any (or any *important*) good.⁵ That claim is not easily proved, and when it becomes clear that the critic requires this claim about ethical theories, or one much like it, in order to make her case, the apparent simplicity and force of the problem of evil as a proposed refutation of Christianity vanishes. It does not provide a "short and snappy" refutation.

Two familiar themes are relevant here; I think both are central to an ethical theory that comports with, and arises from,

God allows an evil only if he has a morally sufficient reason for doing so.

Christian theology: (i) persons are autonomous agents—agents capable of acting rightly, but also of acting wrongly, on morally significant occasions; each thus develops a moral character for which he or she is responsible; (ii) only by struggling with actual evils does one significantly exercise moral agency. An ethical theory which develops such themes as these will be far different from that which yields the result the critic desires. Yet they are the ones, I think, that theism requires (and which are the most plausible in any case).⁶

5. Epistemology and Evil

The critic serves the theist well; many errors of reasoning and doctrine can be removed from Christian theology in the light of clear and sharp critique. The critic is often a better friend than she, or her Christian target, knows. I think this is the case regarding the problem of evil. One way in which this is so is that the critic makes it clear to the Christian that *God exists* entails *God allows an evil only if he has a morally sufficient reason for doing so*. Necessarily, an all-good God will not allow evils unless it is good that he do so.

If we reflect about the matter, we can see that there are lots of evils which have this feature: while God may have a sufficient reason for allowing them, we have no idea what that reason is. Sometimes, this is taken to be evidence against Christianity. The argument that it is goes like this: if there are evils whose point, if any, is utterly unclear to us, then it is unreasonable to believe that these evils have any point—to believe that God has any morally sufficient reason for allowing

them. There are evils whose point, if any, is utterly unclear to us. So there are evils that it is unreasonable to think have any point—unreasonable to think God has any morally sufficient reason for allowing. But if there are evils like that, it is unreasonable to believe that God exists.

This argument assumes that if God has a morally sufficient reason for allowing an evil, then we will be able to see what that reason is. And that seems just false; our not knowing of any such reason does not entail, or make it probable, that there is none.⁷

An interesting conclusion, though, seems to follow from these considerations. Consider some particular evil *E*—some wrong choice or human cancer or the like. How, exactly, is one to know that there is no point served by—no morally sufficient reason for—*E*, short of knowing that God does not exist?⁸ Perhaps even then I would not know this about *E*; for present purposes, that does not matter. The point is that *E exists* and *God exists* entail *God has a morally sufficient reason for allowing E*.⁹ So I can know that *E* has no point—that God has no morally sufficient reason for allowing it—only if I know that *God exists* is false. I cannot, then, offer *There are pointless evils* as evidence against *God exists*, unless I have some reason, independent of the existence of the allegedly pointless evils, to think that God does not exist.

One can put the point as follows. It seems to be a necessary truth (a statement whose denial is contradiction) that (1) *God exists and there is evil* is true if and only if (2) *God has a morally sufficient reason for allowing the evils he allows* is true. The critic and the Christian agree that *There is evil* is true. The critic thinks *God exists* is false. One way for the critic to argue from (1) *There is evil* to (3) *There is no God* is to infer from (2a) *Some evils are pointless* or (2b) *Some evils are such that if God exists then he has no morally sufficient reason for allowing them* and (1) to (3). But (2a) and (2b) are false if (3) is true—false, that is, if God exists. So the critic cannot know that (2a) or (2b) is true unless the critic already knows that God does not exist. But then it will not be the existence of allegedly pointless evils that tells the critic this.

6. Conclusion¹⁰

I have defended these claims: (i) *God exists* and *There is evil* is not a contradiction; (ii) *If God allows an evil, he has a morally sufficient reason for doing so* is not a contradiction—indeed, it is a necessary truth; (iii) the problem of evil is more accurately viewed as concerned with ethics and epistemology than with logical consistency alone; (iv) there is at least one view of ethics which is consistent with (and naturally arises from) Christianity for which the existence of evil is not morally inappropriate; (v) that there are evils whose point we cannot discern is not evidence that Christianity is false; (vi) the existence of evil could not provide evidence against God's existence unless we already knew, on other grounds, that God did not exist. If these claims are true, then much at least of the problem of evil is solved. In particular, this is so if the consistency strategy succeeds, and the epistemic situation regarding *God exists* and *There is evil* is properly stated in Section 5.¹¹

FOOTNOTES

⁷The problem of evil can be stated externally (the critic accepts the truth of *There is evil* and claims that this is inconsistent with, or provides evidence against, *God exists*) or internally (the critic notes that the theist is committed to both *There is evil* and *God exists*, and claims that the former is inconsistent with, or provides evidence against, the latter). Here, I discuss the problem as stated externally. Exactly the same points can be rephrased to meet the objections if they are posed internally.

⁸Two articles have become contemporary classics as statements of the problem of evil: J. L. Mackie, "Evil and Omnipotence," *Mind* (1955) and H. J. McCloskey, "God and Evil," *Philosophical Quarterly* (1960).

⁹Standard applications of the consistency strategy are found in: George Mavrodes, *Belief in God: A Study in the Epistemology of Religion* (Random House) and Alvin Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil* (Eerdmans).

¹⁰I have tried to put these matters more fully in "The Problem of Evil" recently in the *Southwestern Journal of Philosophy*. Cf. such passages as Hebrews 3:9–11 and I Peter 1:3–9.

¹¹The "internal" way of putting this is: "Any ethical theory compatible with theism will deny that the existence of evil is necessary for the existence of any (important) good"—a highly implausible claim.

¹²See Charles Fried, *Right and Wrong* (Harvard University Press), Alan Donagan, *The Theory of Morality* (University of Chicago Press), and R. Downie and E. Telfer, *Respect for Persons* (Methuen).

¹³This is argued more fully in "A Premature Farewell to Theism," *Religious Studies* (1969).

¹⁴That God has a morally sufficient reason for allowing an evil (which is what I mean here by an evil's having a point) does not entail that a person is not culpable or wrong in bringing that evil about. See "Ethics, Evils, and Theism," *Sophia* (1969).

¹⁵This does not entail that it would be wrong for us to eliminate *E*. See "The Greater Good Defense," *Sophia* (1974).

¹⁶The argument of this section, and the paper as a whole, is developed more fully in *Christianity and Contemporary Philosophy* (forthcoming, Eerdmans).

¹⁷The recently-released volume edited by Stephen T. Davis, *Encountering Evil* (John Knox), discusses the problem of evil through a presentation and critique of five different theodicies, dealing with some of the questions considered in this essay as well as others.

VIDEO CASSETTES ON CHRISTOLOGY CONSULTATION

Evangelical theologians from the Two Thirds World (Africa, Asia and Latin America) gathered in Bangkok, Thailand March 20–27 for a Consultation on Christology. The ten major lectures from this significant consultation will be available at the end of April on video cassettes. Speakers will include, among others, Michael Nazir Ali, Vinay Samuel, Kwame Bediako, and Ronald Sider. For more information, write David Bussau, Partnership in Mission, P.O. Box 162, St. Ives, Sydney 2075, Australia.

THE FATHERS: IMITATION PEARLS AMONG GENUINE SWINE

By Frederick W. Norris, Professor of Christian Doctrine, Emmanuel School of Religion.

When a seminarian first stumbles upon (or is pushed into) the "Church Fathers," there are two typical responses: "those men were brilliant!" or "how boring!" Continued study usually prompts another, more significant observation: "they dealt with the same issues we face today." Fred Norris offers here not primarily an analytical article or a bibliographic guide, but an impressionistic painting. Enjoy Norris, then read the Fathers.

—MLB

My first acquaintance with that odd lot called the Fathers came during a general survey of church history as a sophomore in college. The judgment of such a wise fool as me was confused and dismayed by many of the people from the Patristic era. I could not praise ignorant monks who attacked and at times killed the opponents of their leaders. They seemed more like hired thugs than admired saints. Yet those who counted on their support have been reckoned among the Fathers of the faith. What are we to think of those such as Theophilus or even Cyril whose political desires led them to wink at such violence?

Some of the great theological debates of the early church appeared at first sight to deserve the platitudes often used to deride them. Perhaps there was only an iota of difference between certain of the Homoousians and the Homoioussians. Twenty years ago I certainly did not yet grasp its supposedly earth-shaking