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On the Form of 'The Problem of Evil'

Is the evil in the world compatible with the existence of an omnipotent, omniscient and completely good deity? I am concerned with the kind of discussion that is possible of this question for the diminishing number of those to whom it can mean anything, and it seems to me that the primary philosophical task as usual is to put a stop to what generally goes on.

Until fairly recently the situation was that while some producers and followers of the literature were interested only in technicalities, there were plenty for whom an outcome that they could regard as established would have meant a great deal. These were the theists and atheists who saw themselves as solution proposers and solution critics respectively. The critical point of view would harden into the position that consistency could only be achieved by abolishing belief in, or as it would more likely be called the hypothesis of, the deity. The solution proposer's capacity for religious belief on the other hand bred confidence in him that the makings of a harmonization were available, but whenever he tried to work one out his lines of thought would snap on obstacles he could not get around.

Over the last dozen years the picture has changed on the surface in a way that has flattered the theists. They have not progressed with their solution proposing but take themselves to have benefited from the emergence of a new critical position

according to which the possibility of a solution to the problem cannot be ruled out. The new critical position in other words purports to establish the existence of a solution-space without putting anything in it. I have the impression that this result is widely thought to represent 'the present state of the art' so far as English-speaking treatments of the problem are concerned: if so, I think it is a compliment to Nelson Pike (Hume on Evil, *Philosophical Review* 1963).

Despite the gulf between the new critic with his ironical support for the theist and the older critic with his propensity to urge that the problem was insoluble, and despite the gulf between either of them and the classical solution proposer, I hold the resemblance between all these positions to be vastly greater than the differences. For when there is consensus about the way an explainer would have to set about explaining something, when there is agreement as to what would be needed in order to account for it although there may be dispute over whether the necessary item is available, those concerned are making sense of the business in the same way. If the parties to a controversy in the field of value agree as regards what ought to be but not as regards what is, there is an altogether greater kinship between them than there would be if they agreed about what is but not what ought to be (indeed if one is speaking from the standpoint of value, what I have just said is analytic).

The relation between the positions of the solution-critic and solution-proposer in their dispute over 'the problem of evil' is that what the one thinks evil ought to do but does not, the other thinks it ought to do and does. The problem presents itself to each as what I call 'the problem of evil' in inverted commas, the form of which is the same as that of the family of its would-be solutions. The solution-space envisaged for it is of a certain shape and when attempted solutions are condemned as unsatisfactory they are dismissed for not being self-consistent fillers of a space of that shape. Again, when it is emphasized that the problem has not been shown to be unsusceptible of solution, the possibility held to be unexcludable is

the possibility of a solution which if it existed would be of the form taken by those already proposed.

For the purpose of supporting my contention I shall now use, in a way the author did not envisage, a justly admired article on 'the problem of evil' by J. L. Mackie called *Evil and Omnipotence* (*Mind* 1955, reprinted in *The Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Mitchell, Oxford 1971). Mackie divided the available solutions into two categories, the adequate and the fallacious. He did not spend time on the former and neither shall I because 'adequate' solutions on his definition deny one or more of the propositions constituting the problem and I agree with him that the problem cannot be dismantled in that way. So the only solutions in the running are of the kind he classed as fallacious and it is this class of solutions I had in mind when I said the form of 'the problem of evil' was that of its solutions. In considering his account of them I shall not be interested in any particular fallacies he says they commit, for it would make no difference to my position if none existed. From Mackie's point of view the fallacies have to be there because the 'fallacious' solutions which assert all the propositions constitutive of the problem (along with some further thesis that is supposed to show how they are mutually compatible) attempt something that cannot with consistency be done. There are various haverings by which he says they present the appearance of doing it without actually doing it and he offers an account of the way this happens in a range of cases. However this may be, it is to be noticed that the role of a solution to 'the problem of evil' is that of providing an extra thesis which, when tacked on to the set of propositions constituting the problem, will allow them to be seen as consistent.

The range of extra theses that offer prospect of helping is not unlimited. Mackie lists four without claiming his survey to be exhaustive but with the sentiment: if anyone can think of another then let him produce it (and I echo that sentiment). The four theses are: (1) 'Good cannot exist without evil' or 'Evil is a necessary counterpart to good'; (2) 'Evil is necessary

as a means to good'; (3) 'The universe is better with some evil in it than it could be if there were no evil'; (4) 'Evil is due to human free will' (pp. 95, 97 and 100). Mackie gives various reasons for rejecting these theses. The significant fact about them for me is that they all have something in common—a shared theme which can be identified quite readily in the case of the first three. It is that evil is to be explained as being in one way or another required to exist for the sake of good. The first thesis represents evil as a logical requirement of good and holds this requirement to have an ontological implication: however, without assistance from one of the other theses it cannot withstand the objection that the amount of evil in existence is greater than the amount if any that would logically be required. Thesis 1 then is hardly more than a prelude to the development of the solution theme in theses 2, 3 and 4; and thesis 4 involves thesis 3 since, as Mackie puts it, 'To explain why a wholly good God gave men free will although it would lead to some important evils, it must be argued that it is better on the whole that men should act freely, and sometimes err, than that they should be innocent automata, acting rightly in a wholly determined way' (p. 100).

The general character of the solution theme to 'the problem of evil' may be further brought about by asking what the good that evil is necessary for is supposed on this conception to be the good of. The answer that in one way or another is being given or implied is: the good of the world. I would say too that the world is being considered from the standpoint of a rational assessor who is passing judgement on it as something which either does or does not come up to scratch as an intelligently designed place, bearing in mind that it is to be lived in by beings who *are* something—bearers of value, members of a Kingdom of Ends. The idea of Heaven may be brought into the calculation, but when it is, there is no change of perspective. The world *qua* obstacle course is judged to be a good world on the ground that with its evil it provides the training needed for the development of souls. In all of its versions then the solution theme for 'the problem of evil' says or implies that

the evil in the world makes a necessary contribution to the good of the world.

Although this idea about the role of evil in the economics of goodness does not entail the idea that everything is for the best in the best of all possible worlds, the two ideas hang closely together: they invoke the same deity—the one I have called the deified rationalist (p. 208)—and the solution theme for 'the problem of evil' is either an application of Leibniz's principle of optimism or else a relative version of it which I would call the principle of meliorism. The principle of optimism affirms that the world is the best of all possible worlds and in that light explains why everything within the world is the way it is. The solution theme for 'the problem of evil' picks out, from the class of all things so to say, the class of evils and explains why they in particular are as they are, by saying that without them in all their existing quality and quantity the world would be neither as good as it is nor as good as it could be. If it is thought in addition that the world *is* as good as a world could be, the principle of optimism is being applied: if it is allowed that the world could be bettered by some other world or if that question is left open, the principle applied is the principle of meliorism. The difference is not in my opinion important. Either way the goodness of the world is viewed as a kind of general good or good mix from which evil could not without detriment be subtracted, and either way the same kind of perspective is attributed to the world-designer. It is a Utilitarian style of thinking—like that of the Chairman of the Praesidium who conceives his country's wellbeing as something for the sake of which those he is shooting ought to be profoundly glad to be shot.

Offering an explanation of evil in which the Creator is represented as a contriver and credited with the thought-style of a President of the Immortals is rather like tackling Bubonic plague by breeding rats. For the response which was anticipated when the problem was posed, and which might have been expected to be given its quietus by the solution, is called for more obviously by the solution than by the problem. I

mean: it is when you are told that evil, and terrible evil too, has been brought into being on purpose for the sake of achieving some good, that you are as clearly justified as you ever could be in protesting—not about the price being too high, as though the ratio between entry fee and pay-off were the trouble. It would then be a question of compensation and someone for whom this were the issue could be assuaged by the promise of infinite comfort in a realm unseen. No, I am thinking of the protest you could make simply by pointing to a signal case of suffering, such as a child's dying of meningitis (Somerset Maugham's example). You would ask only that it be looked at, that attention be directed to the nature of the affliction. Good cannot possibly be purchased by a plan that brings such things in its train and would not be by any decent human being. I shall recur to the spirit of this protest and would ask you to note that I claim on its behalf no less and no more than that if it were appropriate anywhere it would be as clearly appropriate as it could be here, that is, in relation to the form of the solutions to 'the problem of evil': I am not considering it as a response to the problem of evil and *a fortiori* have not advocated that it should enter into our dealings with that.

The accepted or rejected solutions to 'the problem of evil' have, as I said, the function of supplying an extra thesis which when conjoined with the propositions constituting the problem would effect a reconciliation and allow them to be seen as consistent with each other. Yet the original propositions, 'God is omnipotent and omniscient', 'God is completely good' and 'Evil exists' were not inconsistent in the first place—which is as well, since if there really had been an inconsistency between them when taken by themselves it would have been out of the question logically to try to remove it by adding something. But then in that case, how did it come to be thought that there was a task of reconciliation for the solution theme to perform? By *havering*. That was Mackie's term for what goes on later in the minds of the would-be solvers of the problem, and no doubt it does, but only after the crucial piece of havering has already taken place. The havering I am now concerned to

expose occurs in a trice at the stage when the problem is being presented and is of first importance because it introduces a twist in what the problem is taken to be. So that the problem is said to be one thing (the problem of evil) but treated as another ('the problem of evil'): it is supposed to be the problem of whether a certain small group G of propositions can be entertained together, but is dealt with as though the difficulty were that of asserting together without contradiction another group consisting of $G + 1$. Although Mackie's exposition of the problem does not escape my charge of havering it is the most revealing that I know: he does his havering with the lights on.

Mackie repudiated the automatic assumption that there was an inconsistency between the original propositions mentioned in the last paragraph. He pointed out that in order to generate a contradiction, some further proposition must be found and added. He added one. But at the same time he spoke as if the contradiction were somehow latent in the original propositions—'the contradiction does not arise immediately . . .' (p. 93). The proposition he introduced was that 'a good, omnipotent thing eliminates evil completely'. Having made the addition, he did not examine what he had added but proceeded to argue that the contradiction thus generated could not be eliminated and that any 'solutions' which tried to get round it, by adding something yet again, were fallacious.

Such is the logic of 'the problem of evil'. Starting with a consistent set of propositions—the familiar triad which although consistent poses the problem of evil—someone adds a thesis which in conjunction with them creates a contradiction, thereby producing what I call 'the problem of evil' (in inverted commas). He then finds, as well he might if he has done the job properly, that the problem is insoluble. He still takes the problem to be that of maintaining the original set of propositions, notwithstanding the fact that he enlarged the set with an importation. And a striking feature of his treatment is the readiness with which he attributes to the imported proposition a well-foundedness which makes it more immune against

denial than any of the original propositions. In this way the problem is found to be insoluble. Unless . . .

A visitor from outer space might suppose that the only way of carrying the discussion further would be to blow down the house of cards; if so he would be wrong, for it is possible to build another storey on top. Here we come to the development which 'the problem of evil' received at the hands of Pike and which has been turned into an industry by Plantinga. Pike like Mackie sees that unless some further thesis is introduced the original propositions can be maintained without a contradiction's being involved, indeed he emphasizes the point; but again like Mackie, he has his eye on an additional proposition which presents itself to him as an indispensable component of the problem. The proposition which in Pike's treatment turns the problem of evil into 'the problem of evil' is that 'an omnipotent, omniscient being could have no morally sufficient reason for allowing instances of suffering' (p. 183). The respect in which Pike goes beyond Mackie lies in his willingness to countenance the possibility that the additional proposition may not be true. In fact he offers a demonstration that it is the sort of proposition that cannot be known to be true, so his conclusion is that the problem cannot be shown to be insoluble.

But was this not already the situation at the start? I mean: in so far as the problem of evil is taken to be the question whether anyone who wishes to assert the original triad of propositions can do so without inconsistency of belief, all he has to do is to go ahead with the assertion and decline to add anything. He is not then open to a charge of inconsistency. He does not have to wait to see what some other person might do with an additional thesis that has not been demonstrated to follow from what is on the table. Nor is there any logic by which the proposer of the thesis can think it might be demonstrated to follow. Rather, the extra thesis presents itself to him as what is called 'intuitively obvious'.

There is more than one thing that comes in that category so far as Pike is concerned. For he also says (p. 193): 'a theologian

who accepts the existence of God' (which I find an interesting way of putting it) ' . . . must conclude either that there is some morally sufficient reason for God's allowing suffering in the world, or that there are no instances of suffering in the world. He will of course choose the first alternative.' So the theologian must deny the imported proposition if he can—that too is a *datum* and more of a *datum* than the imported proposition itself was, because it turns out that Pike thinks the theologian *can* deny it. But let no one ask in stupefaction why the imported proposition had to come in, for the immediate answer is obvious. (There is a further explanation to be given when I come to the connection between Pike's importation and Mackie's.)

The imported proposition, that an omnipotent, omniscient being could have no morally sufficient reason for allowing instances of suffering, has to come in because the theologian must deny it. And the theologian must deny it in order to be—when judged from Pike's perspective—a rational and moral theologian.

But suppose there were a theologian who would not deny it: not because he wanted to assert it, but because he would neither assert nor deny it. As I said before, anyone wishing to assert the original propositions constitutive of the problem of evil can go ahead with his assertion and decline to add anything, and in particular he need have no truck with a proposition that refers to God's having or not having a morally sufficient reason for anything. I shall now go further and offer an argument for rejecting Pike's importations as nonsense.

It makes sense for *us* to have or fail to have moral reasons for our doings and refrainings because as human beings we are members of a moral community. We have been born and brought up into a shared form of life in which there are, as there would be in any other form of human life, customs and traditions; ideas, more than one set of them perhaps, about what it is for instance to keep or break faith with another, what ways of behaving incur ignominy, what it is to treat someone well or badly, what justice and injustice are. And we have a

sense of what does and what does not raise these issues: some members of the community have it more strongly than others. But it can only be there for us at all insofar as we are able to use words in their meanings, that is to say in the meanings which they have within and for the community. I am thinking especially of expressions like 'deceive', 'cruel', 'a disgrace' or expressions which signify analogous ideas. Reasons for acting or for refraining from acting are given and received, and have their natural stopping places, in connection with *inter alia* ideas of the kind just mentioned; and without this connection they could not exist as reasons of the type which in this connection they are—that is, moral reasons. So I assert that having or failing to have a moral reason presupposes membership of a moral community.

But God is not a member of a moral community or of any community. To be sure there are small 'g' gods who have been conceived in that way, like those of the ancient Greeks: such gods are like fairies. To credit the one true God with having a moral reason for doing anything is to conceive Him in the manner of Greek popular religion as a being among beings instead of the absolute being who is the Creator of the world. When 'God' is conceived as a one among many he becomes subjectable to moral judgement; and within a moral community of course it would make perfectly good sense for the one by whom, or let us say the chief one by whom we are judged, to be submitted to our moral judgement. When conversely someone speaks in a way that is tantamount to subjecting God to moral judgement—and it belongs to the grammar of 'the problem of evil' that you will not find any treatment of it in which this does not happen in one way or another—then he is regarding God as a being within a community of beings and moreover as belonging to the same community as himself. There is a tone of voice which often goes along with this. Listen to Professor Swinburne: 'For myself I can say that I would not be too happy to worship a creator who expected too little of his creatures'. (*Reason and Religion*, Ed. S. C. Brown, Cornell U.P. 1977, pp. 101–2.) It seems to me that

Swinburne there is invoking a moral fairy and that the creator he *would* be happy to worship would be another fairy out of the same pack—one who set a more commendable standard.

In Pike's discussion of 'the problem of evil' the moral reason which God cannot be shown not to have is represented as one which a theologian must think God does not merely happen to have but must have. So in arguing that God cannot have one I have been offering to any theologian who, like Plantinga, has drawn sustenance from Pike's argument a proof that God does not exist. Other theologians need not be downhearted: it is only God's Pikean or Plantingarian existence I am disproving. In order to do that moreover it is not necessary to go as far as I have gone. An argument that God *need not* have a moral reason when He acts or refrains from acting in relation to evil will suffice if successful. And there is one that can be given independently of the consideration I have put forward about God's not being a member of a moral community. Thus: God need not have a moral reason whether sufficient or insufficient because He need not have any reason. So far from its being the case that God in acting or refraining from acting in relation to evil must have a reason, it is not even true of human beings that they must. On the contrary it is characteristic of the highest actions we know and particularly of the highest exercises of restraint that the person should not just be unable to give but that there should not be any reason for his attitude. Suppose that when subjected to a buffeting he does not hit back but turns the other cheek. What reason could he have for meeting the evil in that way? If it were said that he had a reason for it, the implication would be that his response were a semblance of something else.

Suppose he has been hounded for years by a persecutor who has made repeated attempts on his life. He has escaped by much exertion and knows his strength is failing. At last he finds himself with the tormentor in his power. He has a reason, a moral justification, for eliminating him but instead for no reason he spares him, sets him free to fight another day at yet more cost. The imported proposition by which Mackie con-

verted the problem of evil into 'the problem of evil' was that 'good is opposed to evil in such a way that a good thing always eliminates evil so far as it can'. Always? Mackie's proposition is not even true of our cat.

The two imported propositions I am considering, Mackie's and Pike's, differ in surface appearance, but when the 'unless' clauses by which each is governed are taken into account and it is noted that what the one proposition states the other implies and *vice versa*, it can be seen that in effect they are interchangeable and the fundamental idea is explicit in Mackie's. The 'unless' clause allowed for by Mackie makes his proposition say that a good thing eliminates evil unless the evil is needed for the production of good, in which case the evil's being of such service constitutes the reason for its not being eliminated, and this reason is of the kind Pike calls 'morally sufficient'. Pike's proposition that an omnipotent, omniscient being could have no morally sufficient reason for allowing instances of suffering implies that if the being is good it will not allow but will eliminate suffering. And again there is an 'unless' clause, since Pike envisages the possibility of a morally sufficient reason's being furnished after all, in which case the proposition would have to be negated. But when he concludes that his proposition is in a permanent state of negatability he nevertheless cannot drop it. It must remain on view in the state in which he had first formulated it (that is as a necessary proposition) for the sake of the essential idea it contains about the non-allowance of suffering. Expressed in Mackie's terms, the first principle by which the goodness of Pike's omnipotent being is tested is that such a being would want to eliminate evil (suffering) completely. Without this idea, neither of these writers can take a step. Yet Mackie only states it as an aside and Pike never states it explicitly at all. What I would like you to see as astonishing is the disparity between the perfunctoriness with which the essential idea is imported and the momentousness of the question to which it offers an answer.

When Mackie intimates that good and evil are opposed, and that the way in which they are opposed is that the first elimi-

nates the second, you are to take what he says not as an observation about just any kind of goodness but as expressing the relation in which supreme goodness stands towards evil. Now it seems to me that whatever anyone tried to say about that—about the disposition of a, or as it should rather be, *the* supremely good spirit towards evil and suffering—would have to be uttered *de bas en haut*. If it were not, this would show that the speaker did not take the idea of supreme goodness seriously and were not mindful of his own position in relation to it. If he did not think he were addressing himself to an awesome wonder, the likely alternative would be that he would theorize as though supreme goodness could be relied upon to do something commonplace.

The man who accepted the evil that came to him when he showed mercy to his adversary did something not commonplace but nevertheless intelligible. He could have been guided by a familiar conception, that of the sporting chance. He was dealing with another human being; one whose enmity he could understand (at any rate up to a point—'war is war', 'that is how men are').

The difficulty presented to theodicy by the evil human beings suffer at the hands of their fellow creatures is invariably (I do not say rightly) held to be nowhere near so great as that presented by the evil which comes to them of necessity in their sufferings from natural causes. The former is, a matter of the cruelty of man to man and if more needs to be said there can be recourse to the Christian doctrine of The Fall or to what is called in the literature of 'the problem of evil' The Free Will Defence. The latter is not susceptible to such treatment. If it is not God's cruelty to man, what is it?

It is not impossible for it to be seen as God's love. I offer this neither as *the* answer nor as *my* answer to the question but cite it as a perspective: one which is not accessible to many but one from which it is possible for suffering to be seen, possible because it has been seen that way, by Julian of Norwich for instance: 'But freely our Lord giveth when he will; and suffer us in woe sometime. And both is one love'. I was quoting then

from her *Revelations of Divine Love*, of which she said, 'These Revelations were shewed to a simple creature that could no letter the year of our Lord 1373, the eighth day of May. Which creature desired afore three gifts of God. The First was mind of his Passion; the Second was bodily sickness in youth, at thirty years of age; the Third was to have of God's gift three wounds'.

Someone who did not find this incoherent might still wonder how far it touched the most difficult aspect of the problem. An attitude possible for an exceptional person in suffering is not necessarily adoptable towards the suffering of another. Could Julian have wished that the serious illness which was to come to her should go to someone else? Obviously not. But she used the plural in the passage about the one love—'and suffer us in woe sometime'. And it may have been that she could see more clearly in the suffering of another the Passion of Christ which she prayed her own suffering might in some way resemble.

When I turn from her position and look again at the other, where the speech is of God's cruelty to man, of handing in one's ticket and so on, there seems to be an element of rhetoric in it which I do not find in Mother Julian. That the speeches of protest can express something strongly felt I do not question. The speaker has compassion, otherwise he would not be driven to fulminate as he does. Yet his words do not exactly express compassion but rather something else—a further and different element in his perspective which apparently is more central to it than the other, since it is what he mainly expressed. My name for it is the ethics of indignation; and with this I come to my final point though it is not my least about the form of 'the problem of evil'.

The literature of 'the problem of evil' presents a theodicy extrapolated from the ethics of indignation. There is nothing out of the way about this ethics: on the contrary it is the most captivating form of the ethics of praise and blame which current orthodoxy in moral philosophy dresses into a theory. Pike is among the subscribers to this orthodoxy. In connection

with his claim about the theologian's having to conclude that God has a morally sufficient reason for allowing suffering, he tells us what it is for someone to have a morally sufficient reason for his action: 'To say that there is a morally sufficient reason for his action is simply to say that there is a circumstance or condition which, when known, renders *blame* (though, of course, not responsibility) for the action inappropriate' (p. 183). So the God who cannot be shown not to have a morally sufficient reason for whatever he does or sanctions is a God whom you cannot confidently blame—you cannot wax indignant about him without jumping the gun. The type of solution for which 'the problem of evil' allows space is thus calculated to preserve your proclivity to indignation to feeding a sop to it. Theologians whose theodicy is a branch of prescriptivism find this comforting.

